



Editorial Introduction

This briefing paper discusses the modus operandi of gay dating platform-related blackmail; and the ways in which technology and sociopolitical factors influence such abuse. To do this, this paper presents two case studies drawn from semi-structured interviews with people who have faced such abuse. By illustrating the technological and sociopolitical factors behind gay dating platform-related blackmail, this paper calls for sociopolitical change and technological safeguards to prevent such abuse, and better support victims/survivors.

About the Author

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Gay dating app-related blackmail: Anatomy, contexts and risk factors

Rahul Sinha-Roy

Gay dating platform-related blackmail has emerged as a key form of victimisation in recent years (see Dasgupta, 2021). This briefing paper explains the anatomy of blackmail on gay dating platforms: the contexts in which it takes place and the two forms it takes. It also illustrates that, in addition to perpetrators, multiple technological and sociopolitical factors play a key role in facilitating these crimes. This paper draws from semi-structured interviews conducted with gay dating platform users in India. The data come from a larger project conducted by the author for their PhD, which received high-risk ethics approval from the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee on 31 August 2020 (approval number 2000000493). This paper presents two case studies involving blackmail through gay dating platforms and urges for sociopolitical change and technological safeguards to support victim-survivors and prevent these crimes.

Defining blackmail

Blackmail through gay dating platforms usually involves threats of disclosing users' sensitive personal information to their family, workplace or on social media (Birnholtz et al., 2020; Mehta, 2018). Sensitive personal information can include gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual interests, HIV status and gay dating app use. Accordingly, blackmail overlaps with a range of other harms and crimes, including image-based sexual abuse and privacy violation. Blackmail overlaps with image-based sexual abuse when users are blackmailed with threats of distributing their nude or sexual imagery (Mcglynn & Rackley, 2017). Similarly, when threats involve disclosing a user's serostatus, blackmail overlaps with privacy violations and offences under Section 8 of the *HIV Act* (India). Threats are generally followed by requests for money (see Birnholtz et al., 2020; Blackwell et al., 2015).

Blackmailing can occur in a range of contexts related to gay dating platforms. Dating app-related interactions mainly occur in three phases: 1) composing and viewing profiles, 2) chatting with other users and 3) meeting users in the physical world (see Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018). Blackmailers pose as genuine gay dating platform users and target users during or after chatting and during or after meeting them in the physical world.

One modus operandi involves:

- 1) chatting for some time
- 2) gaining trust and obtaining sensitive data, such as place of residence, workplace and social media sites
- 3) threatening to 'out' (publicly disclose someone's queer sexual identity) the unsuspecting user to their family or workplace or on social media unless they are paid money, including threatening to distribute intimate or sexual imagery (consensually shared during chats) on social media or other sensitive places (Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022).

Other ways in which blackmailers work involve:

- 1) meeting users for sex (at their home or even on the street)
- 2) threatening to 'out' them to neighbours, onlookers and others unless they are paid (see Mehta, 2018).

These forms of victimisation are especially isolating, as the fear of victim blaming and being 'outed' stops people from seeking help or reporting such incidents to the police (Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022). The next section explains the anatomy of this abuse using two vignettes drawn from semi-structured interviews with Grindr users in India.

Vignette 1: Blackmailing digitally with threats of image-based sexual abuse

The first case study relates to Boishakh, a student at a government university in Kolkata who was staying at the university hostel at the time. Boishakh narrated his personal experience with blackmail along with threats of image-based sexual abuse. Before being blackmailed, he described chatting with the blackmailer for a few weeks, who was posing as a genuine user.

I came across this [profile] on Grindr without a photo. He claimed to be a junior of my college and shared some pics—face pictures. ... So [after chatting] for one to two

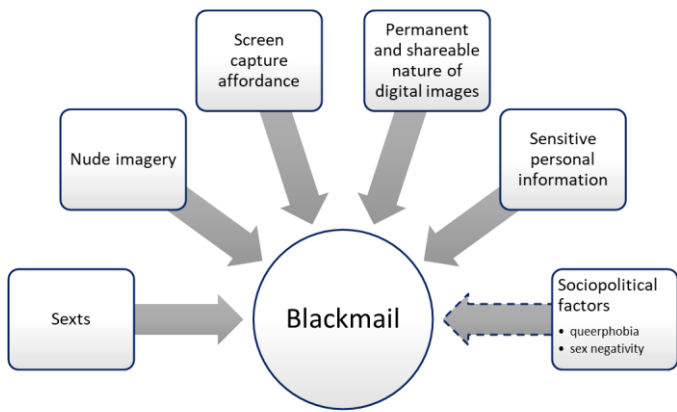
weeks, suddenly this guy took on [a] weird behaviour—[saying] that I should be paying for his books and other [college-related] expenses, and I was like, 'Why? I don't know you. You haven't met me yet, and anyway, I'm not liable to pay for whatever expenses you have'. We had exchanged ... many nudes, so he blackmailed me [by] saying that whatever conversation we had, he has a screenshot of the whole conversation, and if I do not listen to whatever he asks for, he will make those go 'viral' and tell my friends and college authorities.

Boishakh ignored the requests, threatened the blackmailer with legal action and was eventually left alone. Intimate imagery is a source of anxiety that is exploited by blackmailers. Sharing nude imagery and erotic texting (sexting) is written into the design of gay dating platforms. Digital interactions on many gay dating platforms afford, invite and enable the sharing of nude images. This is because 'nude pic[ture]s make online dating ... more real, more intense, and more horny' (Maliapaard & Lisdonk, 2019, p. 147). This is true both for the sharer and the recipient, as it feeds the exhibitionism or narcissism of the sharer as well as the voyeurism of the recipient (see Mowlabocus, 2010; Phillips, 2015). Hence, during sexting, they generate desire or excitement and sometimes disgust or indifference (see Maliapaard & Lisdonk, 2019). Users often share nudes when chatting on dating platforms because it increases the likelihood of a hookup in the physical world.

This is because users can only decide whether they are sufficiently attracted to the person they are conversing with to meet for a date or hookup after scrutinising their bodies, and this is only made possible through exchanging nude pictures, an interaction that is unique to online dating (Phillips, 2015, p. 72). Unfortunately, the shared intimate images are a source of exploitation for blackmailers, as illustrated in Boishakh's narrative.

Blackmailing is made possible due to the nude imagery and erotic texts (sexts) themselves and the permanent and shareable nature of digital images. The combination of private erotic chats and shared sexual imagery along with profile pictures create a *digital queer erotic subjectivity*. This digital subjectivity is permanent and shareable due to other technological affordances, such as screen capture or screenshot technology. This permanence and the shareable nature of digital queer erotic subjectivity—illustrated by Boishakh's comment 'he will make it go viral'—are causative factors in blackmail. In response to this, some platforms such as Blued and Grindr have introduced 'albums' that can be unshared when needed, a feature that makes it harder for people to store others' nude imagery (Grindr, n.d.-a). Despite these measures, users remain vulnerable due to other factors inherent to dating apps: profiles, erotic chats and profile photos.

For blackmail to succeed, it is important that the blackmailer is aware of key places (or people) to threaten to distribute a user's capturable queer erotic subjectivity. Features of dating platforms, such as geolocate features, allow perpetrators to gather sensitive personal information, including residence or workplace. Although some dating platforms have features that can blur or mask the exact location of a user (see Blackwell et al., 2015), approximate locations can still be determined. In Grindr, for example, even for users who have chosen to deselect the 'show my distance' feature, their approximate location can be determined within 100 meters of their actual location (Grindr, n.d.-b). This is especially problematic for users who live on a university campus in colleges, halls or hostels (e.g., Boishakh's case). In these cases, their privacy can be easily compromised.



Moreover, in India, neighbourhoods are tight-knit and familiar (see Abraham, 2018), which increases the likelihood of being identified. In addition to the geolocative feature, people can rapidly disclose personal information during chats. This culture of rapid information oversharing (Agger, 2012) and quick relationship formation (see Ben-Ze'ev, 2009) plays a vital role in blackmail. In Boishakh's narrative, for example, the perpetrator knew where Boishakh lived, where he went to college and who his college authorities were, and the blackmailer threatened to out Boishakh based on this information. This demonstrates that blackmailers exploit their knowledge of a user's sensitive personal information.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that blackmail is only successful due to widespread queerphobia and sex negativity in society. Fear of being outed or being judged for being on a gay dating platform is the vulnerability that blackmailers depend upon to conduct their crimes (see Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022). These sociopolitical factors are explained in greater detail in the next case study on blackmail.

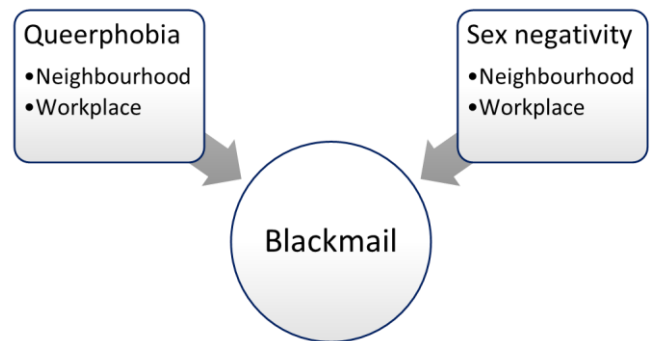
Vignette 2: Blackmailing physically with threats of 'outing'

The second vignette involves Anand, a gay man from Punjab, who was living in Chennai at the time for work. Anand had a high-paying job and was living in a serviced apartment provided to him by his employer. Anand recounted meeting his blackmailer through Grindr. They chatted for some time on the app, exchanged numbers and met for sex at Anand's residence. After having sex, Anand asked the blackmailer to leave, and the blackmailer asked for money, which shocked Anand. When Anand stated they had not discussed any money and refused to pay him for sex, the blackmailer 'created a ruckus out there' and called an accomplice, who happened to be a *hijra*. (As *hijras* are readily recognised as queer by people at large in Indian society, perhaps Anand felt more threatened about being outed by the accomplice's presence.)

Anand was 'terrified' and felt that the situation was 'horrible', so he concocted a story and asked his apartment manager for help. Anand invented the following story to tell his apartment manager:

I met this fellow in a mall. He is a student, was wanting some money and some help, so I told him to come over: we can go out for dinner. That was an evening, around 8:30 p.m.–9 p.m., and now that he's here, I am telling him to come with me to go for the dinner, and he's creating a ruckus that I am sexually exploiting him, and he's wanting money.

The manager intervened and was able to handle the situation quickly. The blackmailer showed everyone their chat conversation on Grindr, as well as on WhatsApp. Anand said that, as he had not shared anything explicit, he was able to make an excuse that the blackmailer must have used Anand's Blackberry PIN or Instagram to create a fake identity to create these chat conversations. Anand did not know how much of the story the manager believed, but he helped him get rid of the blackmailer. The blackmailer left after Anand paid him 5,000 INR.



This narrative suggests that gay dating platform-related blackmail succeeds due to structural queerphobia and sex negativity. Anand was okay with paying the money to the blackmailer, as he 'did not want [the incident] to escalate to the police'. Moreover, as the apartment he was staying in was provided by his workplace, a police incident could jeopardise this arrangement or his employment. Anand was glad that the incident was not reported to his workplace and that the building manager was helpful. Anand's story illustrates that blackmail is successful in these contexts due to structural queerphobia in workplaces and housing. Additionally, the blackmailer claiming to be a sex worker and showing the Grindr chat messages to the manager illustrate their exploitation of societal sex negativity. As considerable stigma is attached to sex work and people employing sex workers' services (see Jain & Nyblade, 2012), people might refuse to intervene in these situations. Alternatively, they might presume that the demand for money is justifiable. Additionally, these strategies create anxiety in victim-survivors regarding resisting the crime or seeking help. This creates an additional layer of vulnerability for gay dating platform users entrapped by blackmailers.

Conclusion: Preventing gay dating platform–related blackmail

This paper illustrated that gay dating platform–related blackmail occurs due to a combination of technological affordances and queer-exclusionary sociopolitical factors. Much of the safe dating advice revolves around users regulating their behaviour to reduce the likelihood of being blackmailed or extorted (see Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022). Placing the responsibility of safety solely on users feeds into victim blaming and makes it difficult to seek help in the event of victimisation (Sinha-Roy & Ball, 2022). Hence, shifting the focus to queer-exclusionary sociopolitical and technological factors behind such crimes will help in terms of developing meaningful prevention strategies.

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