



Internet Watch Foundation

Study of Self-Generated Sexually Explicit Images & Videos Featuring Young People Online

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was designed to provide a snapshot of the availability of online self-generated sexual content featuring young people and the extent to which such content, once posted online, is then redistributed via parasite websites.

The study used public reports of potential online child sexual abuse material made to the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) Hotline over a four week period in September 2012.

The content was assessed using three criteria:

1. Is the content being assessed "self-generated content" featuring "young people"?
2. Is the content being assessed a still image or a video?
3. Does the content being assessed appear on a "parasite website"?

The key finding of the study was that 10,776 (88%) of the 12,224 images and videos assessed by the Hotline during this four week period as meeting the research criteria appeared on parasite websites, providing an indication as to the extent to which control over self-generated content is lost once it has been circulated online.

These findings provide evidence to support the importance of the education work delivered by child protection agencies to raise awareness of the permanence of information on the internet and the risks inherent to young people in creating and distributing this type of content.

This paper also sets out the limitations on the study and makes recommendations for further research which can be undertaken to expand upon and clarify the findings and to inform effective targeting of future educational initiatives relating to self-generated sexual content featuring young people.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The IWF had for some time been aware of an increase in the online availability of self-generated sexual content featuring young people. However, existing research into the issue focusses mainly on the legal complications surrounding its distribution such as the enforcement of existing legislation relating to child sexual abuse material, the potential criminalisation of the young people concerned and on the drivers and/or potential social implications for young people in creating and distributing sexual images/videos of themselves or their acquaintances (Leary, 2010³; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, Harvey, 2012⁴; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011⁵).

There is a lack of extant data on the availability of the content itself, the methods of online distribution and the extent of the loss of control over the removal and/or onward distribution of this content.

The IWF had also seen an increase in the number of websites which had apparently been created specifically to display self-generated sexually explicit images and videos featuring young people.

IWF Analysts have observed when assessing these websites that the content does not appear to have been uploaded to these websites by the young people depicted, but that

the content seems to have been harvested from third-party websites such as social networking sites or live video chat websites.

The purpose of this study was to record instances of sexually explicit self-generated images and videos featuring young people currently in circulation on the internet and use that snapshot of data to attempt to quantify the extent of the risk relating to loss of control of that content once it has appeared online.

It is intended that the results of the study be utilised by child protection organisations working directly with young people in relation to the issue of distribution of self-generated sexual content, to consolidate the message behind such awareness raising initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

The study took place over a four week period in September 2012.

During the course of the study, IWF Internet Content Analysts dedicated time to assessing and cataloguing content from leads generated by public reports. In deciding whether the content fell within the remit of the study assessments were made in relation to the following three criteria:

- 1. Is the content being assessed "self-generated content" featuring "young people"?**
- 2. Is the content being assessed a still image or a video?**
- 3. Does the content being assessed appear on a "parasite website"?**

IWF Analysts were able to deduce the likely original provenance of the content in a number of ways, including:

- Branding embedded onto the content by the source website;
- The domain name or URL of the parasite website, which often features the name of the source website;
- The filename of the image or video which will often feature a combination of the name of the source website and the username used by the individual depicted on the source website;
- Text appearing in conjunction with the content on the parasite website which indicates the source website;
- Any additional information provided by the reporter at the time a report to the IWF Hotline was made.

DEFINITIONS

To define the terms used for the purposes of this study:

"Self-generated content" is defined as "nude or semi-nude images or videos created by a young person knowingly engaging in erotic or sexual activity".

The IWF assesses child sexual abuse material according to the levels set out in the Sentencing Guidelines Council's Definitive Guidelines of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (reproduced in full at Appendix A) and therefore the use of the term "erotic" in this context was intended to reflect the IWF's standard threshold for actioning content assessed as meeting the criteria of Level 1 of the Guidelines in that the predominant focus of the image is on the naked genitalia of the person(s) depicted. "Sexual activity" sufficiently encapsulates the criteria for Levels 2-5 of the Guidelines.

"Young person" is defined as "an individual assessed as being between 13-20 years of age".

This broad age range reflects one of the major challenges faced by the IWF in taking action regarding this type of content. In the course of their daily work, IWF Analysts are assessing content to attempt to establish whether the person depicted is under the age of 18. However, particularly in relation to self-generated content featuring young women, age assessment can be complicated by the fact that the young women depicted are usually pubescent and will often have attempted to appear more adult. IWF must therefore err on the side of caution in taking action in such cases where age verification is not possible, even where there is a strong suspicion that the individuals depicted are under the age of 18 years. For the purposes of the study it was therefore decided to broaden the age range to mitigate this.

"Parasite website" is defined as "a website created for the purposes of displaying self-generated content where the content has apparently been harvested from the website to which it was originally uploaded".

Definitions of the types of parasite websites generally encountered by the IWF Hotline appear at Appendix B.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

During the course of the study, Analysts assessed 12,224 images and videos as meeting the research criteria and definition of self-generated content.

This total breaks down into 7,147 images and 5,077 videos.

The content assessed appeared on 68 different websites hosted in a variety of geographical locations worldwide.

Over the course of the four week study, the amount of Analyst time solely dedicated to the study was 47 working hours.

Of the 12,224 images/videos logged during the course of the study, 10,776 of these were assessed as appearing on parasite websites. Therefore 88.15% of the content assessed as part of this study had been redistributed from its original upload location.

In only 14 instances were IWF Analysts unable to make a determination as to whether the website on which the content appeared was a parasite website. This would be the case where, for example, the website allowed upload of content but information which may have indicated provenance was entirely absent.

CONCLUSIONS

The amount of self-generated content assessed during the course of the study provides a snapshot of the large volumes of self-generated content featuring young people currently in circulation online.

The finding that 88% of the content assessed appeared on parasite websites demonstrates the extent to which control over self-generated content can be lost once it has been circulated online.

Once this content has been redistributed to parasite websites, the young people depicted have no direct control regarding its removal or onward distribution with the result that potentially it may never subsequently be possible to remove it entirely from circulation. The finding provides child protection agencies (such as Childnet and South West Grid for Learning) with the evidence to demonstrate this fact to young people in order that they may gain a greater understanding of the risks.

LIMITATIONS ON THE STUDY

The findings of the study are based on a snapshot of self-generated content located and assessed within a one month period. Whilst the large volume of images and videos gives an indication that the amount of self-generated content in circulation online is potentially large, it is not possible to extrapolate from this data the exact figures relating to either the amount of self-generated content in existence or the overall proportion of that which has been harvested from its original upload location.

A number of questions relating to self-generated sexual content fell outside the scope of the present study. These questions include:

1. The motivations of the young people depicted in creating and distributing sexual content, including whether they may have been coerced into doing so;
2. Whether the young people depicted had given permission for the creation and distribution of the content;
3. In the case of live webcam websites, whether the young people depicted were aware at the time that a permanent recording of their activity was being made or whether they believed that their activity was only being viewed in real time;
4. The exact age of the young people depicted in the content.

Establishing the answers to these questions would undoubtedly enable more effective targeting of resources in this area of child protection in the online environment.

IWF is able to provide data in relation to the volumes and trends in distribution of self-generated sexual content depicting young people in circulation on the internet. However, IWF is not well placed to undertake research into the points above for the following reasons (same numbering for ease of reference):

- 1-3. The IWF does not generally have direct contact with the individuals depicted in the images and videos which it is called upon to assess, as reports to the IWF Hotline are received via a web-based report form which enables reports to be made by any member of the public who has concerns regarding content they have encountered

online. Reports can be made without the requirement to provide contact details should the reporter so choose.

4. A major challenge to the IWF in taking action regarding self-generated sexual content featuring pubescent young people is that age assessment is problematic and without clear evidence (such as verification from law enforcement) that the individuals depicted are/were under the age of 18 years at the time the content was created, IWF runs the wholly unacceptable risk of acting beyond its powers. A broad age range of 13-20 years of age was therefore used for this study.

It is important to note that the remit of IWF relates solely to content which is publicly available. IWF does not have the authority to pass payment barriers in order to access or download potentially criminal material and these findings therefore relate only to content that was publicly available to view and/or download.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study captured a snapshot of the volume of self-generated content featuring young people which appeared online during September 2012 and whether it had been redistributed from its original location. It is recommended that this study be repeated on an annual basis to map distribution trends relating to this content. It is also recommended that any such future studies by IWF be expanded to incorporate some or all of the following research questions:

1. Is it possible to identify the most popular methods/software being employed to harvest content from the original upload location?
2. Which specific websites has the self-generated content harvested by parasite websites originally been uploaded to?
3. To what extent does self-generated content depicting young people, feature on parasite websites which are predominantly dedicated to the distribution of child sexual abuse material?
4. To what extent are the same self-generated images and videos duplicated across multiple parasite websites?

APPENDIX A

Sentencing Guidelines Council's Definitive Guidelines of the Sexual Offences Act 2003

(Part 6A: Indecent Photographs of Children)

| Levels | Description |
|---------------|--------------------|
|---------------|--------------------|

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | Images depicting erotic posing with no sexual activity |
| 2 | Non-penetrative sexual activity between children or solo masturbation by a child |
| 3 | Non-penetrative sexual activity between adults and children |
| 4 | Penetrative sexual activity involving a child or children, or both children and adults |
| 5 | Sadism or penetration of or by an animal |

APPENDIX B

Types of Parasite Website

Imageboards (Also Known As "Chan Boards")

Similar to online forums, these sites enable posting of an image and a comment and/or links to content on third party one-click hosting sites, which will often consist of a video for download. Content may be posted to these sites by individuals with a sexual interest in children but also by contemporaries of the young people depicted, often with requests for others to "rate" the content or in cases where the subject is unknown to the poster to request further details from others who may know their identity. Additional content featuring the same individual is also often requested.

Thumbnail Gallery Posts (TGPs)/Free Hosted Galleries (FHGs)

Content is scraped from third party websites using image aggregation software/fusking software and uploaded from a database to form collections of thumbnails which then blindlink to further TGPs/FHGs, often with the ultimate aim of driving traffic to adult pornography pay sites. Minimal human intervention may be required in these cases as content is indexed and stored in the database via metadata related to the images and videos – for example the content may have been tagged with keywords such as "teen", "young", "masturbating", webcam" etc.

Dedicated Blogs and Forums

Generally free hosting sites, which enable users to easily create an account and set up a generic blog or forum on which to upload content. The content usually consists of a brief description and screenshots taken from videos which are then available to download from third party websites via links appearing on the site. From the comments and replies which appear on the page in conjunction with the content, the sites are clearly being moderated and content is apparently individually selected for upload. Whilst blogs and forums dedicated solely to self-generated content featuring young people are in existence, these sites may also contain child sexual abuse material featuring pre-pubescent children.

Abused Services Allowing Upload of User Generated Content

Any image/video sharing site, including mainstream social networking sites, not those solely dedicated to pornographic material.

Adult Pornography Websites

It is very common for the IWF to encounter dedicated galleries on adult pornography websites which consist solely of self-generated images/videos depicting young people. The galleries are tagged with keywords such as "teen", "young", "self-shot", "webcam" etc. The IWF has taken action to remove such content from adult pornography sites where the images/videos appearing are of victims verified by law enforcement to have been under the age of 18 years at the time the content was made.

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