



Open Access Original Research

Examining Perceptions of Sextortion in the General Population

Anisha Gohil, BSc^{1*}, Dean Fido, PhD^{1,2}

Citation: Gohil, A., Fido, D. (2022). Examining Perceptions of Sextortion in the General Population. Journal of Concurrent Disorders.

Editor-in-Chief: Mona Nouroozifar

Guest-editors: Dean Fido & Masood Zangeneh

Associate editor: Greta Kaluzeviciute

Received: 07/24/2021

Accepted: 10/10/2021

Published (Online

First): 12/10/2021



Copyright: ©2022 Gohil, A., Fido, D. Licensee CDS Press, Toronto, Canada. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

¹ University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB, United Kingdom

² ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8454-3042>

*Corresponding author: Anish Gohil, anishagohil2000@outlook.com

Abstract. The non-consensual sharing of sexual images of another (or threats thereof) represents an increasingly important and pervasive issue in forensic psychology. However, despite recent legislative developments within the United Kingdom, there still exists a need for greater understanding of perceptions within the general public of the dangers and manifestations of image-based sexual abuse and the process by which people are being (s)extorted using their private images. Ten participants ($M_{age} = 24.8$ years; $SD = 9.33$; 70% female) took part in semi-structured interviews which were analysed using an inductive thematic analytic approach, wherein the themes of [1] Education as a Prevention against Image Based Sexual Abuse, [2] Victim Blaming Prevalence in Society, [3] Stereotypes about Victim and Perpetrator, and [4] Low Priority for Criminal Justice were explored. Taken together, data suggests that although there exists a ‘working knowledge’ of image-based sexual abuse, the concept of sextortion is understood to a lesser extent with clear implications for the need for educational policies to better inform younger members of society of associated dangers and legalities.

Keywords: Sextortion; Image-Based Sexual Abuse; Revenge Pornography; Thematic Analysis

Introduction

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) represents a constellation of behaviours that include the generation and dissemination of private sexual media (Harper et al., 2021). Although behaviours such as upskirting, cyberflashing, and the generation of faked sexual images and/or videos (i.e., deepfaking) are included under this umbrella term, the behaviour most discussed within scholarly literature – and that which is the focus of this manuscript – is the non-consensual dissemination (or threat thereof) of private sexual images; commonly, yet inappropriately (see McGlynn & Rackley, 2017), referred to as *revenge pornography*. Therefore, the present study focused upon a United Kingdom (UK) sample to explore perceptions of IBSA and sextortion within the general public. Akin to victims of physical sexual abuse, victims of revenge pornography suffer immediate harm across physical, psychological, and social dimensions (Henry et al., 2019), which can also have secondary consequences that are pervasive and long-lasting, such as isolation and the inability to gain or maintain employment (Bates, 2017; Campbell et al., in press).

In the UK (but also more broadly across the globe, see Fido & Harper, 2020), there now exists legislation such as the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, which classifies revenge pornography as a sexual offence. However, despite recent reports of the prevalence of and harm to victims of IBSA (Davidson et al., 2019), empirical data suggests that one's judgements and perceptions of perpetrators, victims, and acts of IBSA might be dependent on situational and demographic factors. For example, Bothamley and Tully (2018) suggested that judgements of harm and blame vary as a function of the length of relationship and cause of relationship breakdown between perpetrators and their victims, with Scott and Gavin (2018) indicating that vignettes of IBSA were perceived to be more serious when the perpetrator and victims were male and female respectively, as well as when vignettes were rated by female, relative to male participants. Moreover, recent literature suggests that perceptions of victim blame might increase when individuals within the shared images were nude, relative to in lingerie (McKinlay & Lavis, 2020), and when images were self-taken, relative to being taken by the perpetrator (Zvi & Bitton, 2021); potentially due to such victims being seen as behaving more promiscuously.

Of importance, it is not only the act of dissemination that is legislated against in the UK, but also the threat to distribute intimate images through the recent Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (Buckland & Atkins, 2021). Such threats have been coined *sextortion* (McGlynn et al., 2017), and describe instances where individuals seek to coerce others into digital or physical sexual behaviour (or even for financial gain) through threatening to distribute or generate sexual materials. Mirroring positions of McGlynn and colleagues, the public consider sextortion as reflecting an imbalance of power; whereby males are – in many instances – using their power to coerce women into sexual relations and behaviour (Liggett, 2019; Mumporeze et al., 2019). The position of power is also reflected in court documents and

media articles wherein content analysis suggested that the use of sextortion involves the exertion of power and control over victims through sustained threats of exposure (O' Malley & Holt, 2020). In American samples, 5% of school-aged children aged between 12-17 have been subjected to sextortion (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018), with said victims typically being female and either partners or ex-partners of the (often male) perpetrators (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018; Wolak et al., 2018); aligning well with the typical demographics of victims of revenge pornography more broadly (Uhl et al., 2018). Of interest, though both these studies recognise the potential position of male victims in terms of sextortion, such individuals are often targeted for monetary relative to sexual gain (Liggett, 2019; O' Malley & Holt, 2020).

Although not the focus of this manuscript (although see Walker & Sleath, 2017 for an in-depth review), it would be remiss to avoid mention of the process by which much of the public attribute to being the precursor of revenge pornography and sextortion, that of the (consensually) taking and sending of sexual images and text – '*sexting*' (Kopecký, 2017). Sexting has become a mainstream type of sexual interaction (Ouytsel et al., 2020) as a means of creating intimacy, facilitating sexual experimentation, and maintaining sexual desire and satisfaction within relationships (Burkett, 2015; Mori et al., 2020). Indeed, although variation exists regarding the extent to which males and females might sext committed and casual partners (Drouin et al., 2017), amongst teenagers, sharing solicited and unsolicited sexual images is considered normal (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). However, despite this perceived normality, some young females report negative reactions such as anger when receiving sexual messages (Reed et al., 2020), with sexting being found to influence day-to-day life within one Swedish secondary school sample reporting increased power-based relationships and online sexual harassment (Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021). As such, although sexting has positive socio-sexual mechanisms within the modern dating landscape, the sharing of sexual images can – and indeed does – form conduits for acts of revenge pornography and sextortion during the breakdown of relationships.

Taken together, despite emerging literature on the topic of sextortion, much of this knowledge base focuses solely on quantitative accounts of past incidents (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018) and takes place in countries outside of the UK wherein recent legislative changes have brought the matter to the forefront of the public eye (Buckland & Atkins, 2021). As such, this research set out to qualitatively study the perceptions of IBSA and sextortion within a sample derived from the UK within this developing legal landscape.

Methods

Participants

In line with current discourse around data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021), ten participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.8$ years; $SD = 9.33$; 70% female) took part in semi-structured interviews after responding to an online advertisement disseminated through the research team's social networks as well as an institutional research participation scheme whereby time was reimbursed through research credits (not required to complete their course or graduate). Inclusion criteria requested that participants were aged 18 years or older, spoke fluent English, and were from the UK. Each participant received a pseudonym which was used throughout the transcription and interpretation processes.

Materials and Procedure

Ethical approval for the research was granted by a UK University research ethics committee. After indicating a desire to take part in the research, participants were sent an online information sheet via Qualtrics (survey hosting software), which outlined core details of the study in addition to information pertaining to confidentiality, data management, and signposts for support. Following informed consent, the lead researcher (AG) conducted one-to-one, semi-structured interviews online through Microsoft Teams using an interview schedule centred around perceptions of IBSA and sextortion. The gender of the interviewer is female and in total, eight of the participants knew the lead researcher prior to the interview. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes. The interview schedule specifically focused on areas of [1] general knowledge, [2] victims and perpetrators, [3] long-term effects on victims, and [4] perceptions of IBSA and sextortion within the UK criminal justice system; with each section comprised of four to six questions. Where specific questions of sextortion took place, a definition was given in line with McGlynn et al. (2017), which frames offenders as coercing others by threats and/or violence into distributing images and/or creating images for said purpose. Participants were debriefed verbally and via an online follow-up document after taking part in the research.

Data Analysis Strategy

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis as a means of identifying patterns and themes within the data. The analytic process consisted of six steps as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following repeated readings of the data, codes were given to interesting segments of the data related to the research question. Similar codes were grouped together into candidate themes. When following the steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) coherence would have been ensured as step three required consideration of the relationship between codes and themes. Further, step four ensured reliability as this required reviewing data extracts against themes to see if there was enough supporting evidence. Revisions to the

relationships between these themes then led to some themes becoming collapsed into others, thereby delimiting the main themes and their subthemes. In total, 157 codes were found, examples of codes found were sextortion as a private crime, revenge pornography as a public crime, place the blame on the offender and not the victim, and abuse of power. The present study uses an experiential approach whereby the context, outlook, and experiences are endorsed and conveyed within the data and where the participant's meanings are prioritised and explored (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This study takes a critical realist approach as the data is not seen to reflect the world directly but needs to be interpreted to comprehend the structures which gather the phenomena we are gaining information about (Willig, 2013).

Results and Discussion

As delineated in terms of prevalence in Table 1., the four main themes identified within the study included [1] 'Education as a Prevention Against Image Based Sexual Abuse', [2] 'Victim Blaming Prevalence in Society' (subthemes were 'Victim Recovery through Support Networks' and 'The Negative Aftermath upon Victims'), [3] 'Stereotypes about Victim and Perpetrator', and [4] 'Low Priority for Criminal Justice'. As can be seen in the table the list of themes and subthemes found whilst detailing the number of participants which discussed these themes also.

Table 1.

Themes prevalent within the sample

Main themes	Subthemes	Number of participants who discussed theme
Education as a Prevention Against Image Based Sexual Abuse		5
Victim Blaming Prevalence in Society	Victim Recovery through Support Networks The Negative Aftermath upon Victims	5
Stereotypes about Victim and Perpetrator		5
Low Priority for Criminal Justice		5

Theme 1: Education as a prevention against Image Based Sexual Abuse

The importance of education was prevalent across five interviews, with participants indicating an importance of education as a means of driving awareness of IBSA and associated sextortion within school settings and beyond. Thus, emphasising that participants perceive education as important around this topic to raise awareness. This can be seen from the accounts of Angela and Amy below where suggestions are given on how to educate individuals in this area:

“Yeah I think it’s about educating in schools erm and again just look at you know looking at where they go where are you going maximise getting that message across and it might be programmes on TV as well I know they tend to watch the vloggers and bloggers erm podcasts anything like that to get that message across” (Angela, 51)

“I think some education around that is definitely interesting to find out and should be available for people to understand and find out about erm and I think yeah adverts and documentaries definitely are a way of trying to help people understand that it is a crime” (Amy, 24)

Here, Amy and Angela support the role of education in schools both directly or via mediums such as television or social media as means of reaching target audiences who are largely impacted by IBSA. This position aligns well with Berndtsson and Odenbring (2021) wherein sexting and the distribution of private sexual images were found to be prevalent in secondary schools, and in doing so, impacting day-to-day life. One example of how this affected an individual was their wellbeing whilst at school (Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021). Similarly, from the accounts of Jason and Ben, the importance of education in schools and colleges are highlighted:

“I think they really need to like hit home on how actually important it is because especially with people around teenager ages say from year nine to sixth form your going through puberty and your learning about yourself and what you like and who you like...” (Jason, 21)

“Education is always the best way you’d hope anyway so like from the age of year seven realistically for sexual based images you’d do that in your PSHE classes so I’d put it in drill it in and put it on the curriculum and then also regards to sextortion it should be year ten onwards so fifteen onwards ...” (Ben, 25)

Seemingly, teenage years are seen as core periods to develop knowledge about one’s own sexuality and sexual behaviour. Previously, there has been a position within recent literature that indicates that lesbian,

gay, and bisexual teenagers have tended to send sexual text messages, but without including information which might identify them (Ouytsel et al., 2021). Ben's position further emphasises the need for changes to educational policy through the implementation of IBSA-related knowledge and experience into the curriculum; indicating that education provides an ideal means to intervene and generate awareness. Moreover, the importance of education surrounding laws is highlighted by Poppy:

“Any laws against it or anything and get out what your doing is an offence like because I don't know if there is but if there is then people should be aware like what your doing is illegal or your having an effect on someone's health which in affect is just as bad so yeah” (Poppy, 22)

Specifically, education around laws pertinent to such behaviour – as well as the wider associated health implications – might form a core component of this educational processes. An example of an emotional response found by Reed et al. (2020) highlighted girls reporting negative responses when sexual messages were sent to them. Thus, showing behaviours such as sexting may not always have a positive desired effect links well Poppy's position about the possible health implications which may occur due to another's actions. As such, it seems vital to explore the implications of sextortion victimisation further. Taken together, this theme helps to answer the research question of how IBSA is perceived by individuals as education seems to be of high importance to the participants.

Theme 2: Victim Blaming Prevalence in Society

The second theme identified within this research centres around negative views held against victims of IBSA and sextortion, who are often blamed for their victimisation (McKinlay & Lavis, 2020; Zvi & Bitton, 2021). This theme is explored through the two subthemes, that of 'Victim Recovery through Support Networks' and 'The Negative Aftermath upon the Victims', each of which were supported by five participants.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Victim Recovery through Support Networks

This theme focuses on the various ways in which participants stated they could envisage the victim seeking help, including helplines and anonymous reporting services, family and friends, and support groups. Amy begins her position by acknowledging that IBSA can have long lasting effects:

“That one thing can completely throw them off their rest of their lives so I definitely think it would be a long -term process to try and get over it and maybe they would need help with that journey” (Amy, 24)

This suggests only one action is needed such as IBSA which impacts the rest of an individual's life including detriments to job seeking and relationship maintenance (Campbell et al., in press), which suggests that recovery could be a long-term process in which support networks would be key to helping the victims. Angela and Jason suggest other means by which they would hope victims would receive support, such as through family and friends:

"I feel physically sick for that victim because of what their life is now turned into because of the person who has done that to them erm and you just hope that they would get the support from the right support from friends and family" (Angela, 51)

"If they feel like they are under pressure or feeling like they are going to be a victim they should feel comfortable enough to going to an adult like a parent if they aren't involved I think there's so many helplines that can help as well..." (Jason, 21)

Such positions suggest that in some cases individuals might feel like they are going to be victimised, and in doing so demonstrates findings of Kopecký (2017) where stopping the actions beforehand to not let the offender obtain any material has vital importance. In the above data, this reflects cases where individuals might *feel* that something is about to go wrong during the breakdown of a relationship and so reaching out to familial or peer support networks are of vital importance. Therefore, showing participants perceive IBSA as a crime which can cause detrimental effects to victims as the negative outcomes are recognised in which accessing support networks for the recovery of victims would be essential. Potential examples of hotlines and support groups are considered by Poppy and Ben:

"Erm I'd say to try and speak up about it about someone or I know there's like hotlines and stuff like that they can call so even if it's anonymous just so you have got it off your chest..." (Poppy, 22)

"There should be services which help these people come out you know feel don't feel anxious whenever they go outside or go online or whenever they post a selfie on Instagram there should be a support group for these people..." (Ben, 25)

Support groups are key from this account after the victimisation has occurred as further day-to-day events might have negative impacts on the victim, and maps neatly onto Henry et al. (2019) where IBSA is highlighted to have physical, social, and psychological consequences that may be long-lasting.

Sub-Theme 2.2: The Negative Aftermath upon Victims

This secondary sub-theme outlines the negative effects which might occur to participants after their victimisation and is discussed within the context of vulnerabilities around trust, suicide, withdrawal, and anxiety. When questioned about the impact of the victimisation, negative effects such as anxiety, feeling scared, and suicide are shown to be prevalent by Amy and Angela:

“I think once something creeps up on you and affects you online I think socially you tend to then question in person you know about what people are thinking or feeling so I think it would be make them a very anxious person a very scared person I would probably say in their day to day living” (Amy, 24)

“I mean at the time of it happening they would probably be suicidal so their mental health they would be suicidal they would feel that erm totally ashamed of what’s happened” (Angela, 51)

Within other participant accounts similar viewpoints were held with issues of trust, isolation, paranoia, withdrawal and weariness; indicating wide-reaching negative impacts on victims of IBSA which map onto existing research elsewhere (Bates, 2017; Campbell et al., in press). As such the recognition of the harm caused by this crime is acknowledged by participants as many suggest how this can impact victims showing they perceive this as a crime with long- lasting effects. As such, there is a clear importance for policy makers, law enforcers, and support networks to better understand and implement interventions aimed at targeting and alleviating said impacts. From below Ben and Angela state their viewpoints on how victim blaming can arise if IBSA were to occur:

“The crime should start when the person starts spreading it or using it against them or you know what I mean it shouldn’t be a contribution that sounds too strong I think because it’s almost putting the blame on the victim slightly ‘you shouldn’t have done this you shouldn’t have done that’...” (Ben, 25)

“But erm you know if you have got two consenting people that your you know doing whatever these you know that’s it so no the only way that it would be for the victim don’t take those types of images don’t share them you know because then you know think about what potentially could happen but then is that putting blame on victim...” (Angela, 51)

The above data suggests that victims should not be blamed for the crime which has occurred; however, it is implied that it is known that some victims may be blamed. Supporting this view, McKinlay & Lavis (2020) found nudity may be a factor which increases blame towards the victim when comparing images in lingerie, with victims perceived to be more

promiscuous. Further, Zvi & Bitton (2021) found a difference with self-taken images and images taken without acknowledgement; with most blame attributed to the offender however, with self-taken images more blame was attributed to the victim. Thus, factors such as the level of nudity and who initially took the image may moderate victim blaming views, and indirectly impact the level of support given to the victim. From this theme participants acknowledge victim blaming views could occur in society showing they perceive IBSA as a crime in which blame may be transferred on to the victim than the offender due to the nature of this showing resemblance to other crimes such as rape. When asked to reflect on how victims may be viewed, Poppy and Jason position two viewpoints:

“They are quick to blame the victim which I feel like a lot of people won’t come forward erm but some people are really understanding and say it’s not the victims fault...” (Poppy, 22)

“There are so many different opinions that can happen so you have got people that will say ‘oh the victim kind of deserved it though because that’s what they were doing’ for example if there’s a girl it’s ‘ooh she should not have been dressed that way’...” (Jason, 21)

From the above, victim blaming might be an issue portrayed within society that mirrors those seen within the rape mythology literature applied to physical sexual abuse (e.g., Grubb & Turner, 2012; Singh et al., 2018). In part, this might also map on to cultural and familial views, which to date remain largely unexplored in the area of IBSA:

“I know my parents erm who are little bit old fashioned who aren’t so keen on technology wouldn’t understand it because they wouldn’t understand why you would share that information with people erm so my view would be sympathetic whereas I think some might be less sympathetic and think they are just as bad as the abuser really for sending that information” (Amy, 24)

This implies generational differences may occur with parents being an example of how victims may be viewed and suggests some individuals would place the victim and offender at the same level. As sexting is a behaviour largely associated with younger individuals (Ouytsel et al., 2020; Setty, 2020) this might partly explain why parents may not fully understand this behaviour and how it fits in with modern day socio-sexual mating behaviour and the maintenance of intimacy (Burkett, 2015; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). Taken together, this data indicates that social factors such as peers within the younger generation might have a key influence on help seeking behaviour and understanding when seeking help.

Theme 3: Stereotypes about Victim and Perpetrator

Across five interviews, participants mentioned at least once their idea of a victim and perpetrator which conforms to the ideal stereotype of a female victim and male perpetrator. Although many mentioned that a victim may be anybody, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that sex-related stereotypes seemingly exist within this IBSA and sextortion-focused investigation. Ben describes the similarities between sextortion and domestic abuse:

“I know that it happens to men and women but predominantly its women and I’m guessing it’s the same for sextortion I’m guessing it is women who get sucked into it and it’s a case of trying to get out because the offender errrm person that’s obviously doing it is more than likely a male and they will have a dominating role which would stop them from coming out and trying to tell people about it because they feel scared or you know they are going to wonder what is going to happen if they do tell someone so I think it’s very similar to domestic abuse on that side of things” (Ben, 25)

Here, although contrasts between domestic abuse and sextortion highlighted, their mechanisms and effects are considered similar; aligning well with Bates (2017) who notes similar effects between revenge pornography victims and rape survivors such as the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. This theme helps answer part of the research question as it is shown that although it is recognised by many participants that anyone can be a victim, most perceive a victim as female and perpetrator as male even with IBSA. Therefore, linking to the name of the theme ‘Stereotypes about victim and perpetrator’. When asked about their opinion on victims and perpetrators of IBSA, stereotypical views can be seen within Poppy and Amy’s accounts:

“I think that erm women are more likely to be the victims of sextortion just because I don’t know why I think maybe the media has that you hear more about it in media where women have been affected and maybe men are as well but you don’t hear about it I think men are less likely to come forward if they have been a victim of sextortion...” (Poppy, 22)

“I would say it could be anyone however I think the view is it is very impressionable young women that are the target normally but again that’s not to say that doesn’t include other people as well that’s just the generalised view I would say” (Amy, 24)

Across other participant accounts, similar topics were highlighted such as the way in which the media communicates news of male perpetrators and female victims, and potential under-reporting of male

victims. This position is consistent with Uhl et al. (2018) and Wolak et al. (2018) where it was suggested that women are mainly the victims of sexual crimes with male victims, even though we are aware of male victims of sextortion (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). Given that male, relative to female perpetrators of IBSA are often considered to be more serious and dangerous (Scott & Gavin, 2018), it is vital to conduct further investigation into understanding how such views might bring about wider impact on victims who might be under-supported.

Theme 4: Low Priority for Criminal Justice

The final theme focuses upon perceptions of the seriousness of and punishment for IBSA, where five participants questioned the effectiveness of laws and punishment in this area as well as perceptions of leniency when dealing with such crimes when compared to other crimes. Jason highlights the long-term impacts on victims should be of priority:

“I think what would be helpful is if they understood what they actually done to the other person and fully understand the consequence of what they have actually done to someone in regards to how someone like is not going to trust again or the fact that people aren’t going to be on social media as much and closed off...” (Jason, 21)

Being able to articulate and understand the detrimental experiences of victims is of obvious concern for our participants, though we must be conscious that such data is consider inside a vacuum and away from experimental manipulation as seen in Bothamley and Tully (2018) and Scott and Gavin (2018) where situational and demographic factors have been shown to manipulate victim perceptions. This theme shows participants regard IBSA as a crime of high importance but needs to be acknowledged on the same level within the Criminal Justice System as many stated this might be viewed as a low priority crime when compared to others which is resembled within the title of the theme.

However, although legal scholars have positioned sextortion as being of growing concern within the legal sphere (McGlynn et al., 2017), Poppy and Amy offer conflicting opinions of how this direction is perceived within the general population:

“Watching that documentary like some people have thousands and thousands of images and then they go and get like ten hours of community service or sometimes that’s not a lot for how much of an effect you have had on a person life ten hours of community service is nothing it’s not erm any good like that at all like what have you learnt in that ten hours of sweeping rubbish or whatever it’s not you haven’t been made to think how the victim has felt in that situation it’s just a waste of time yeah” (Poppy, 22)

“I wouldn’t say they judge it as one of the biggest crimes erm in terms of length of sentence I think they probably say it’s one of their biggest growing concerns” (Amy, 24)

Though it remains to be understood the extent to which the general population might perceive severity disparity between contact and non-contact sexual offences and/or reasons for why this might exist, in the UK at least, legislation is evolving to better deal with IBSA, and threats thereof (Buckland & Atkins, 2021); suggesting that this evolving area of investigation is receiving the necessary attention.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore perceptions of IBSA and sextortion within the UK general public, and in doing so, to better understand where improvements might be made to better inform the public and potential victims. Using a thematic analytic approach, participants discussed IBSA through the themes of [1] ‘Education as a Prevention against Image Based Sexual Abuse’, [2] ‘Victim Blaming Prevalence in Society’ (subthemes were ‘Victim Recovery through Support Networks’ and ‘The Negative Aftermath upon Victims’), [3] ‘Stereotypes about Victim and Perpetrator’, and [4] ‘Low Priority for Criminal Justice’.

The findings from this study show how IBSA fits in within wider sexual abuse literature. The theme, ‘Victim blaming prevalence in society’ could link to rape literature as victim blaming is also prevalent here due to rape myths (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Singh et al., 2018). Further, the theme ‘Stereotypes about victim and perpetrator’ mirror stereotypes found in past research (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018; Scott & Gavin, 2018; Uhl et al., 2018; Wolak et al., 2018). Core findings suggested that across responders there was a pervasive acknowledgement that victim blaming exists for IBSA within the wider population, and that owing to the long-lasting and wider-ranging negative effects that occur through victimisation, more efficient access to support services and interventions are required. Specifically, responders indicate a need for IBSA-related information to be included within the education system to raise awareness of the offence, which is timely owing to the reported normalisation of sexting within this population (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). Moreover, there seemed to exist a belief that the UK criminal justice system places limited importance of IBSA and sextortion relative to physical sexual crimes. However, with recent legislation regulating against even the threat (sextortion) to share private sexual images (Buckland & Atkins, 2021), more work needs to be done within this area to see where such beliefs are being born from and maintained, and what can be done to better educate about them.

Limitations

Of course, findings of this research should be discussed within the context of wider limitations. First, though beyond the scope of this research,

recent publications (e.g., Fido & Harper, 2020) have indicated the need to establish deeper understanding of how cultural norms and demographics might modulate views and perceptions of IBSA. As through the research of Singh et al. (2018) on rape they explored cultural differences in rape myths. Although our approach meant that we were able to draw widely from the general population, it might be that such views differ greatly as a function of whether individuals have been victims of IBSA in the past as well as if have had personal dealings with reporting and/or accessing support services. By setting stricter parameters of participation, future research might benefit better benefit the development of education, policy, and intervention. Second, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that data for this project was collected during a nation-wide *lockdown* during the COVID-19 pandemic; a period which has seen a marked 22% increase in revenge pornography cases (Criddle, 2020). Though not a methodological limitation regarding the aims of the research, future research in this area might more specifically seek to identify experiences of revenge pornography and sextortion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, this research has helped to understand perceptions of IBSA and sextortion in a UK sample following the implementation of legislation aimed at better preventing the non-consensual dissemination, or threat thereof, of private sexual images. It has identified a concern pertaining to disparities between its frequency within schools and an associated lack of education and awareness, and also fears over ease of reporting and afterwards, how victims might be supported and dealt with within the UK criminal justice system. Moving forward, there is a clear need for the development of educational resources for school-aged individuals, as well as a need to establish the depth of understanding that teachers and parents have regarding this contemporary means of sexual abuse.

Positional Statement

This research was conducted in the United Kingdom. Dean Fido is a lecturer in forensic psychology at a UK institution and at the time of writing was lead author Anisha Gohill's supervisor. Dean Fido is an expert in the field of image based sexual abuse and contributed evidence during the development of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. It is through this experience that the research was conducted. During all stages of the research and data analysis, the authors acknowledge their position within this area of research and do not believe that any methodological decisions or results were affected by this.

Funding

None

Availability of data and material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author's contributions

AG and DF developed the concept for the study. AG collected and analysed data under the supervision and guidance of DF. AG and DF drafted the manuscript together.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

Ethics Approval

University of Derby research ethics committee has approved this study. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

References

- Bates, S. (2017). Revenge Porn and Mental Health: A Qualitative Analysis of the Mental Health Effects of Revenge Porn on Female Survivors. *Feminist Criminology*, 12(1), 22-42. DOI:10.1177/1557085116654565
- Berndtsson, K. H., & Odenbring, Y. (2021). They don't even think about what the girl might think about it: students' views on sexting, gender inequalities and power relations in school. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(1), 91-101. DOI:10.1080/09589236.2020.1825217
- Bothamley, S., & Tully, R. J. (2018). Understanding Revenge Pornography: Public Perceptions of Revenge Pornography and Victim Blaming. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, 10(1), 1-10. DOI:10.1108/JACPR-09-2016-0253
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research a Practical Guide for Beginners*. Sage.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), 201-216, DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846
- Buckland, R., & Atkins, V. (2021). *New Laws to Protect Victims Added to Domestic Abuse Bill*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-laws-to-protect-victims-added-to-domestic-abuse-bill>
- Burkett, M. (2015). Sex(t) Talk: A Qualitative Analysis of Young Adults' Negotiations of the Pleasures and Perils of Sexting. *Sexuality & Culture*, 19, 835-863. DOI: 10.1007/s12119-015-9295-0

- Campbell, J. K., Poage, S. M., Godley, S., & Rothman, E. F. (in press). Social anxiety as a consequence of non – consensually disseminated sexually explicit media victimisation. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.
- Criddle, C. (2020, September 17). ‘Revenge porn new normal’ after cases surge in lockdown. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-54149682>
- Davidson, J., Livingstone, S., Jenkins, S., Gekoski, A., Choak, C., Ike, T., & Phillips, K. (2019). *Adult Online Hate, Harassment and Abuse: A Rapid Evidence Assessment*. UK Council for Child Internet Safety. https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/abd7799e319e20e48f7bd4fca88bef1aae1bc106099bbfb8a36e3cf6db49bed4/1896646/Adult_Online_Harms_Report_2019.pdf
- Drouin, M., Coupe, M., & Temple, J. R. (2017). Is Sexting Good for your Relationship? It Depends... *Computers in Human Behavior*, 75, 749-756. DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2017.06.018
- Fido, D., & Harper, C. (2020). *Image-Based Sexual Abuse: A Psychological Perspective*. Palgrave.
- Grubb, A., & Turner, E. (2012). Attribution of blame in rape cases: A review of the impact of rape myth acceptance, gender role conformity and substance use on victim blaming. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 17 (5), 443- 452. DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2012.06.002
- Harper, C. A., Fido, D., & Petronzi, D. (2021). Delineating non-consensual sexual image offending: Towards an empirical approach. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 58, 101547.
- Henry, N., Flynn, A., & Powell, A. (2019). Image-Based Sexual Abuse: Victims and Perpetrators. *Trend & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, (572), 1-19.
- Kopecký, K. (2017). Online Blackmail of Czech Children focused on so -called “Sextortion” (Analysis of Culprit and Victim Behaviors). *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(1), 11-19. DOI: 10.1016/j.tele.2016.04.004
- Liggett, R. (2019). Exploring Online Sextortion. *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly*, 11(4), 45-56.
- McGlynn, C., & Rackley, E. (2017). Image-Based Sexual Abuse. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 37(3), 534-561. DOI: 10.1093/ojls/gqw033.
- McGlynn, C., Rackley, E., & Houghton, R. (2017). Beyond “Revenge Porn”: The Continuum of Image Based Sexual Abuse. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 25(1), 25-46. DOI:10.1007/s10691-017-9343-2
- McKinlay, T., & Lavis, T. (2020). Why did she send it in the first place? Victim Blame in the Context of “Revenge Porn”. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 27(3), 386-396. DOI: 10.1080/13218719.2020.1734977
- Mori, C., Cooke, J. E., Temple, J. R., Ly, A., Lu, Y., Anderson, N., Rash, C., & Madigan, S. (2020). The Prevalence of Sexting Behaviours among Emerging Adults: A Meta-Analysis. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 49(4), 1103-1119. DOI:10.1007/s10508-020-01656-4
- Mumporeze, N., Han- Jin, E., & Nduhura, D. (2019). Let’s Spend a Night Together; I will Increase your Salary: An Analysis of Sextortion Phenomenon in Rwandan Society. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 27(1), 120-137. DOI:10.1080/13552600.2019.1692920
- O’Malley, R. L., & Holt, K. M. (2020). Cyber Sextortion: An Exploratory Analysis of Different Perpetrators Engaging in a Similar Crime. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 00(0), 1-26. DOI: 10.1177/0886260520909186

- Ouytsel, J. V., Punyanunt – Carter, N. M., Walrave, M., & Ponnet, K. (2020). Sexting Within Young Adults' Dating and Romantic Relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 36, 55-59. DOI: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.04.007
- Ouytsel, J. V., Walrave, M., Marez, L. D., Vanhaelewyn, B., & Ponnet, K. (2021). Sexting, Pressured Sexting and Image- Based Sexual Abuse among a Weighted -Sample of Heterosexual and LGB – Youth. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 117, DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106630
- Patchin, J.W., & Hinduja, S. (2018). Sextortion among Adolescents: Results from a National Survey of U.S. Youth. *Sexual Abuse*, 32(1), 1-25. DOI: 10.1177/1079063218800469
- Reed, L. A., Boyer, M. P., Meskunas, H., Tolman, R. M., & Ward, L. M. (2020). How do Adolescents Experience Sexting in Dating Relationships? Motivations to Sext and Responses to Sexting Requests from Dating Partners. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 109, DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104696
- Ricciardelli, R., & Adorjan, M. (2019). “If a Girl’s Photo Gets Sent Around, That’s a Way Bigger Deal Than if a Guy’s Photo Gets Sent Around”: Gender, Sexting, and the Teenage Years. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(5), 563-577. DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2018.1560245
- Scott, A. J., & Gavin, J. (2018). Revenge Pornography: The Influence of Perpetrator – Victim Sex, Observer Sex and Observer Sexting Experience on Perceptions of Seriousness and Responsibility. *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, 8(2), 162-172. DOI: 10.1108/JCP-05-2017-0024
- Setty, E. (2020). “Confident” and “Hot” or “Desperate” and “Cowardly”? Meanings of Young Men’s Sexting Practices in Youth Sexting Culture. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(5), 561-577. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1635681
- Singh, S., Sharma, E., & Dubey, M. (2018). A critique of causes and measures of rape: A systematic review of literature. *Language in India*, 18(4), 293-307.
- Uhl, C. A., Rhyner, K. J., Terrance, C. A., & Lugo, N. R. (2018). An Examination of Nonconsensual Pornography Websites. *Feminism and Psychology*, 28(1), 50-68. DOI:10.1177/0959353517720225.
- Walker, K., & Sleath, E. (2017). A systematic review of the current knowledge regarding revenge pornography and non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit media. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 36, 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.06.010>
- Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. (3rd edition). McGraw Hill Education Open University Press.
- Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Walsh, W., & Treitman, L. (2018). Sextortion of Minors: Characteristics and Dynamics. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 62(1), 72-79. DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.08.014
- Zvi, L., & Bitton, M.S. (2021). Perceptions of Victim and Offender Culpability in Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 27(5), 427-442. DOI: 10.1080/1068316X.2020.1818236