A comparison of judgements of image-based and physical sexual abuse: A pilot study

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Abstract. Despite emerging literature in the field of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA; e.g., so-called "*revenge pornography*") indicating a high, international prevalence of perpetration as well as severe social-, professional-, and health-related impacts, it remains unclear how judgements of IBSA compare to cases of physical sexual abuse (PSA; e.g., rape). *Objectives*. This study aimed to understand whether judgements of offending behaviour differ between physical and image-based sexual abuse types, and whether such differences were further impacted by the sex of the victim. *Methods*. This pilot study (n = 76, M_{age} = 29.75, SD = 10.48) compared judgement scores of vignettes that were differentiated by offence-type (IBSA vs. PSA) and victim sex (male vs. female), whilst controlling for beliefs about revenge pornography. *Results*. Data derived from a 2x2 ANCOVA indicated that participants reported more lenient judgements of vignettes that depicted IBSA, relative to PSA, but no main effect of victim sex nor interaction thereof. Moreover, endorsement of beliefs about revenge pornography predicted more lenient judgements of IBSA, but not PSA. *Conclusion and Implication*. Despite the need for large-scale replications of this pilot study to fully model the reported effects in the context of further moderators and covariates, results indicate a need for education as to the impacts of IBSA on an (inter)national scale.

Keywords: Image-Based Sexual Abuse, Physical Sexual Abuse, Revenge Pornography.

Introduction

A global estimate of 27% of women (aged 15-49 years) who have ever been in a relationship have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV; Sardinha et al., 2022). IPV is defined as any behaviour within a past or current intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm (Gerino et al., 2018). Though physical sexual abuse (PSA) is the focal behaviour of this paper, IPV may also manifest as violence, emotional, and/or financial abuse, which together are linked to severe individual, systemic, and societal consequences, and as such presents a significant public health issue (Gracia et al., 2020). Increased digitisation, social media usage, and technological advancements have resulted in the emergence of online behaviours that have the potential to cause comparable harm to that observed through PSA (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017).

Specifically, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is an emerging phenomenon that refers to the non-consensual taking, creation and/or sharing of sexual images, including threats of distribution and digitally altered sexual material (Fido et al., 2021; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). IBSA is an area that has gained academic interest owing to recent legislative changes (e.g., UK Domestic Abuse Act, 2021), and cases of celebrity victims including Jennifer Lawrence and Kate Upton (Fido & Harper, 2020; Fido et al., 2022; Maddocks, 2018). Of note, despite this study using vignettes whereby current or ex-romantic partners are the perpetrators of IBSA, family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers have also previously been reported as perpetrators of IBSA more broadly for reasons including revenge, sexual gratification, and monetary gain (Fido & Harper, 2020; Henry et al., 2019; Vitis, 2020).

Resulting from a paucity of research into IBSA, in addition to variation in IBSA-related terminology and measurement thereof, prevalence rates for victimisation and perpetration are difficult to determine (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016; Walker & Sleath, 2017). Despite this, a systematic review of IBSA research identified general prevalence rates of IBSA perpetration between 12-30% (McGlynn et al., 2017), with a recent large-scale international study finding that 1 in 3 participants ($n = 6109$) had experienced IBSA victimisation (Powell et al., 2020). Minority groups such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals, those identifying as having a disability, and minority ethnic groups, are more at risk of IBSA victimisation (Maddocks, 2018; McGlynn et al., 2017), with women, and groups aged between 15-19 years most at risk (Powell et al., 2019).

Victims of IBSA often have significantly impacted mental health, including debilitating feelings of humiliation and shame, loss of self-esteem, increased anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Powell et al., 2019; Walker & Sleath, 2017). They are also often exposed to further abuse including verbal and physical harassment, as well as stalking, with 32% of victims reporting being afraid for their safety (Citron & Franks, 2014;

Powell et al., 2019). Impacts in the form of poor mental wellbeing e.g., anxiety, depression, shame, fear of re-victimisation, and time away from work also feature in reviews of PSA victim outcomes (Gonzalez et al., 2022), with additional unique impacts in the form of physical damage (bruises, lacerations, abrasions) and sexually transmitted infections (White, 2021). However, despite similar manifestations of harm across offence-types, there currently exists no empirical investigation into perceptions of harm directly comparing IBSA and PSA. Nevertheless, owing to a wealth of literature positioning the *believability* of victims, the severity of their crimes, and perceived harm, as a function of the presence of residual visual damages (see Grubb & Harrower, 2008 for review), harsher judgements to PSA might be expected, relative to IBSA, owing to the absence of a physical (and observed) component in the latter.

Similar to perceived victim impact across IBSA and PSA, parity is also observed in the literature between judgements of IBSA and PSA victims as a function of their sex. Adding traction to the findings of Scott and Gavin (2018), Fido and colleagues' recent programme of research has consistently found that male (relative to female) victims receive more blame and are viewed to suffer less harm across cases of revenge pornography (Fido et al., 2021), upskirting (Fido et al., *in press*), and deepfake media production (Fido et al., 2022). In the context of PSA, male victims have long been found to receive more blame than females (Davies et al., 2009; Howard, 1984); potentially owing to perceptions that they are masculine and so should be able to fight back (Davies & Rogers, 2006). However, this blame can be reduced when contextualised through evidence of physical resistance (Davies et al., 2009); further mapping on to the potential importance of the role of physicality in judgement variation.

Despite this, a large body of literature exists that frames the attribution of blame to female victims of PSA as a function of offence-supportive beliefs. These are prejudicial and stereotyped beliefs about victims and perpetrators of rape, and the severity of the crime in general, for example victims 'ask for it' by wearing sexually provocative clothing (Burt, 1980). In the context of IBSA, the presence of rape myth acceptance is a strong predictor of increased victim blaming, and lower perception of harm and criminality (Harper et al., 2022). The advent of a specific Beliefs about Revenge Pornography Questionnaire (BRPQ; Harper et al., 2022) has been used to evidence strong relationships between such beliefs and lower empathy, the presence of so-called *dark* personality traits (psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism), belief in a just world, and increased victim blaming and lower perception of IBSA-related harm and criminality. Nevertheless, to date, it remains to be seen whether beliefs about revenge pornography predict variation in attitudes towards PSA. Owing to indices of acceptance of rape myths predicting judgements of both sexual abuse (Bohner et al., 2009) and IBSA (Harper et al., 2022), we would anticipate a theoretically similar index of beliefs about revenge pornography to act in the same manner.

Taken together, this pilot study provides preliminary empirical data as to whether judgements of offending differ between IBSA and PSA, and whether any observed differences manifest as a function of victim sex after controlling for beliefs about revenge pornography. Based on extant literature, we hypothesised more lenient judgements of IBSA, relative to PBSA, which would be further amplified in cases involving male victims. Moreover, we anticipated that higher revenge pornography belief scores (indicative of higher acceptance of detrimental and negative beliefs about revenge pornography) would predict more leniency in offence judgements regardless of offence-type.

Methods

Participants. Seventy-six participants (M_{age} = 29.75, SD = 10.48; 72.4% female) completed an online survey advertised through social media. Inclusion criteria asked participants to be over 18 years of age, fluent in English, resident in the United Kingdom (to control for variation of legislation), and heterosexual (purely for the purpose of controlling for sexuality). Participants did not receive monetary incentive for taking part.

Materials.

Demographics. Participants were asked to report age and sex.

The Beliefs about Revenge Pornography Questionnaire (BRPQ; Harper et al., 2022). The BRPQ is 19-item questionnaire that measures beliefs in revenge porn myths (e.g., "Only promiscuous individuals are victims of revenge pornography") using a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating higher acceptance of beliefs about revenge pornography.

Judgement Questionnaire. Participants read one of four vignettes presenting hypothetical scenarios displaying IBSA or PBSA with female or male victims (Appendix B). A 12-item judgement questionnaire, relating to each vignette, was adapted from similar studies (e.g. Krahé et al., 2007; Scott & Gavin, 2018). The extent to which participants blamed the victim was measured, how criminal they perceived the behaviour to be, and how much harm to the victim was caused (e.g., "How much do you think Heidi is to blame for the incident?") on a 7-point scale. Average scores were computed for each sub-scale, with high scores indicating harsher and more punitive offence-related views (e.g., lower victim blame, higher perceived victim harm, and perceiving the behaviour as requiring criminal justice intervention). An example vignette is:

> *Jason and Heidi had been dating for a while and had sex frequently in their relationship. Throughout the relationship, Jason and Heidi agreed it would be fine for both of them to have some private, sexual*

images of each other on their mobiles to view personally. One night, Jason and Heidi went out with some mutual friends. When they returned home, Jason wanted to have sex with Heidi, but Heidi said that she felt too drunk and so didn't want to. This led to an argument. In anger, Jason posted the private, sexual images of Heidi online without her consent.

Procedure. This study received ethical approval from a UK Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Participants were presented with an invitation outlining the study, eligibility criteria and a hyperlink to the Qualtrics survey. In this survey, participants received a participant information sheet, consent form, demographic questionnaire and then the BRPQ. Participants then randomly received one of four vignettes outlining IBSA or PBSA with a male or female victim. Finally, they completed the judgement questionnaire before receiving a debrief sheet with signposting to relevant support services. On average, the questionnaire took 15 minutes to complete.

Analytical Strategy. Following data screening, a 2 x 2 ANCOVA was conducted to explore the effects of victim sex (male vs. female) and offence type (IBSA vs. PBSA) on judgement scores, whilst controlling for BRPQ scores.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations
As expected, due to the nature of the measures, scores on the BRPQ were positively skewed (M = 48.13, SD = 10.62, Shapiro-Wilk = .857, $p < .001$), and punitive judgements of IBSA (M = 66.03, SD = 13.16, Shapiro-Wilk = .901, $p = .004$) and PSA (M = 71.43, SD = 12.52, Shapiro-Wilk = .874, $p < .001$) were negatively skewed. As showcased in Table 1, demographic variables (age, participant sex) neither predicted BRPQ nor judgement scores across either the whole sample, or when the sample was split as a function of offence type. However, despite this not being replicated across the whole sample or for PSA cases specifically, higher BRPQ scores strongly predicted more lenient judgements for IBSA cases ($r = -.406$, $p = .014$).

Table 1. Pearson Correlations between variables for the whole sample and by offence type

	Whole Sample				IBSA ($n = 36$) and PSA ($n = 40$)			
	[1]	**[2]**	**[3]**	**[4]**	**[1]**	**[2]**	**[3]**	**[4]**
[1] Age	-	-.088	-.065	-.023	-	-.029	-.140	.173
[2] Sex		-	-.029	.087	-.137	-	-.167	.101
[3] BRPQ			-	-.177	.003	.124	-	-.406*
[4] Judgement				-	-.174	.023	.047	-

Note. Male = 0, Female = 1, *p = .014. IBSA correlations above diagonal, PSA correlations below diagonal.

Analysis of Covariance

A 2x2 ANCOVA was used to compare the effects of victim sex (male vs. female) and offence type (IBSA vs. PSA) on judgement scores, whilst controlling for beliefs about revenge pornography. There was a significant main effect of offence type when judgement scores were adjusted for scores on the BRPQ ($F(1, 74) = 4.103$, $p = .047$, $\eta_p^2 = .055$) such that on average, cases involving PSA (M = 72.09, SE = 2.17) were viewed as more criminal in nature with greater perceived victim harm than cases involving IBSA (M = 65.85, SE = 2.19). There was neither a main effect of victim sex ($F(1, 74) = 0.370$, $p = .545$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$) nor interaction thereof ($F(1, 74) = 0.178$, $p = .674$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$).

Discussion

This study aimed to provide an initial exploration into whether judgements of offending behaviour differ between physical and image-based sexual abuse types, and whether such differences were further impacted by the sex of the victim. In line with our primary hypothesis, judgement scores for cases involving IBSA were overall more lenient than those involving PSA after being adjusted for beliefs about revenge pornography. However, and unexpectedly, we found neither a difference in judgement scores as a function of victim sex, nor did we find a significant relationship between scores on the BRPQ and judgements in the PSA condition (though the previously reported negative relationship between the BRPQ and judgements was replicated in the IBSA condition).

Vignettes which portrayed an example of IBSA were judged more leniently than those portraying PSA. Though expected, this finding is somewhat disappointing owing to the severity of social, professional, and health-related impacts that victims of IBSA undergo (Citron & Franks,

2014; Powell et al., 2019; Walker & Sleath, 2017). This finding might suggest a lack of awareness and education around the impacts of IBSA, a matter called for by Fido and Harper (2020). However, although education presents one potential explanation of these observed results, it is important to further tease this finding apart. For example, it could well be the presence of physical damage, not present in IBSA, such as bruises, lacerations, and sexually transmitted infections (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; White, 2021), is what contributes to this perception of 'harm'. This presents the possibility for future research to test situational factors, or even consequences of victimisation between IBSA and PSA offence types.

Unexpectedly, this study also found that attitudes towards sexual abuse were similar regardless of whether the victim featured within the vignette was female or male. With this finding contrasting much of the extant literature featured in IBSA- (Fido et al., 2021; Fido et al., 2022; Scott & Gavin, 2018) and PSA-related (Davies et al., 2009; Howard, 1984) fields. It is not immediately clear as to why this might be, and so it warrants a need for further replication and validation. To this end, it is important to reflect on the disparity between sample sizes (and associated power to detect effects) between this pilot study and previously published studies in this area.

Finally, despite these findings replicating associations between beliefs about revenge pornography and more lenient judgements of IBSA reported recently in Harper et al. (2022), the BRPQ did not predict variation in judgements of PSA. This is a potentially important finding which positions the BRPQ as a unique index of beliefs about revenge pornography, in contrast to measures of rape myth acceptance which appear to predict sexual abuse offence supportive believes more broadly (given that the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) predicted judgements of IBSA in Harper et al., 2022).

Study Limitations

Despite the importance of these preliminary findings, it is necessary to openly discuss limitations of this pilot study and associated future directions of research within this field. First, the sample size is not adequate to detect medium ($f = .25$) or small-to-medium ($f = .17$) effect sizes, where $n = 128$ and $n = 274$ participants would be required, respectively. In practice, this means that results reported here should be treated with caution, and that their full application should be deferred until comprehensive replication and extension has undergone peer review. Such replications might aim to further tease apart the effect of participant sex and the role of additional covariates previously shown to impact abuse-related judgement scores (e.g., self-reported abuse, Fido et al., 2021), whilst replicating such results across a more diverse international landscape. Second, despite vignettes being influenced by situational accounts of sexual abuse, such as those involving couples within a relationship and the presence of alcohol consumption (Becker & Tinkler, 2014), it must be highlighted that alcohol

consumption (by both victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse) predicts more lenient attitudes towards sexual abuse (Abbey et al., 2022). Future replications should remove this potential confound as well as test the observed effects in an array of contexts, which would further allow for the exploration of impact related to situational moderators (e.g., the presence of infidelity, threats to perpetrate vs. actual perpetration, and the sexuality of the victim and perpetrator). Third, vignettes only describe one type of behaviour within the constellations of IBSA- and PBSA-related behaviours. Despite judgements of IBSA using identical measures being relative consistent between situations comprising revenge pornography, deepfake media production, and upskirting offences (e.g. Fido et al., 2023; Fido et al., 2022), to date, there exists no data empirically comparing judgements between multiple types of IBSA. However, data does exist which positions attributions of offence severity between sexual abuse types, as well as the situations wherein such offences take place (e.g., rape by a stranger vs. when seduced; Grubb & Harrower, 2009).

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this study begins to highlight the need for IBSA-related education around the impact that offending behaviour has on victims, as well as the need to better understand how victims construct their experiences and the potential dangers of viewing victims of IBSA as being less deserving of criminal justice intervention and support. This research can be developed on an (inter)national level and has implications for political messaging and educational services across all age groups. Further, this study indicates a potential strength of the BRPQ in that unlike its conceptual counterparts in the physical sexual abuse literature, it uniquely predicts variation in judgements of image-based, but not physical sexual abuse; thus, compounding its validity.

Conflict of Interest

This manuscript is an original work that has not been submitted to nor published anywhere else. All authors have read and approved the paper and have met the criteria for authorship. All authors declare they have 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 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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