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Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Empathy, and Judgements of Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Image (NCDII) Victims

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Abstract. Although reports of non-consensual distribution of another person's intimate images (NCDII) are on the rise, there remains a lack of understanding of its harmful impacts to victims. Nonetheless, extant findings indicate that individual differences may be important contributors to attitudes towards NCDII victims. For instance, Dark Triad personality traits are associated with negative judgements of NCDII victims, and Right-Wing Authoritarianism has been associated with victim-blaming and minimization of harm towards physical sexual abuse victims. This research therefore sought to investigate the relationship between Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and judgements of NCDII victims, and whether it is moderated by affective and cognitive empathy. Adults ($n = 134$) from the general population, recruited online from within the UK, completed self-report questionnaires measuring empathy, RWA, and beliefs about NCDII. Results of linear regression and moderation analyses showed that higher levels of RWA predict more negative judgements of NCDII victims, but cognitive and affective empathy did not significantly moderate this relationship. These findings highlight the importance of considering ideological beliefs in addressing NCDII and suggest that efforts to combat victim-blaming should account for authoritarian attitudes.

Keywords: Personality, Judgements, Revenge Pornography, Image-based Sexual Abuse, Sexual Abuse Victims.

Introduction

The advancement of technology and the internet have allowed various opportunities for development of knowledge and communication with positive impacts on society; however, these advancements have also been abused in harmful and malicious ways. One such way is image-based sexual abuse (IBSA). IBSA involves creating, sharing, or threatening to create or share another person's sexually explicit or intimate material without their consent, and sometimes even without their knowledge (Rousay, 2023). IBSA is an umbrella term encompassing various forms of technologically-facilitated offences: for example, 'upskirting' and 'downblousing' (secretly taking intimate images by aiming a camera up someone else's skirt or down their blouse, and/or distributing such images); deepfake sexual abuse (non-consensually doctoring pornographic/sexual material using artificial intelligence to depict someone in such material); and sextortion (threatening to distribute sexual material unless the victim complies with demands) (Delfino, 2019; Lewis & Anitha, 2023; Najdowski, 2017; O'Malley & Holt, 2022). One particularly prevalent form of IBSA is the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (NCDII), colloquially known as 'revenge pornography'. Although there is no clear consensus on a precise definition of NCDII (Walker & Sleath, 2017), it is most commonly understood as the non-consensual online distribution of nude or sexual images without the victim's consent (Henry et al., 2019).

Increasing rates of IBSA and NCDII have been observed in recent years. For instance, the Revenge Porn Helpline, a UK service supporting victims of IBSA offences, reported a 106% increase of reports in 2023, with nearly 19,000 reports being made that year (The Revenge Porn Helpline, 2023). Despite an increase in reporting, awareness of IBSA is still lacking, and it has only recently garnered acknowledgement. For instance, Franks (2017) showed that in 2013, most people were not familiar with the term IBSA or the existence of this type of behavior. This lack of public awareness and understanding is concerning, as societal attitudes towards victims of NCDII and IBSA can have significant consequences, such as deterring victim reporting and exacerbating harm. Therefore, examining the factors that shape attitudes towards NCDII victims is important for the development of more effective intervention and response strategies. Individual differences, such as personality traits and moral beliefs, may play a key role in influencing perceptions of culpability and blame. Elucidating these psychological mechanisms is crucial for informing victim support services and policy reforms aimed at combating IBSA offending and mitigating its impact.

NCDII and Physical Sexual Abuse

NCDII shares many characteristics with physical sexual abuse (PSA), with some scholars placing the two on the same sexual violence spectrum (McGlynn et al., 2017; O'Connell, 2019). Victims often describe their experiences with NCDII as a form of sexual assault, highlighting the

psychological impact of these crimes (Mandau, 2021; McGlynn et al., 2017). Both NCDII and PSA fundamentally undermine sexual consent and violate rights to sexual autonomy, integrity, and bodily privacy (Call, 2021; Citron & Franks, 2014; Krueger, 2022). In both cases, a victim's consent in one context is often misinterpreted as consent for other contexts (Reece, 2013; Tinsley et al., 2021). Recognizing NCDII as a form of sexual violence enables acknowledgement of the significant trauma experienced by victims, which can be comparable to that of PSA. Moreover, it emphasizes that NCDII, like other forms of sexual violence, is a serious violation of sexual autonomy. This framing counters the tendency to dismiss cyber-crimes as less severe and helps to contextualize NCDII within the broader spectrum of sexual offences.

Impacts

The impacts of NCDII and PSA victimization are devastating, long-lasting, and strikingly similar (Hearn & Hall, 2022). Both victim groups often experience shame, humiliation, abuse, harassment and living in constant fear for their safety, online and in person (Magaldi et al., 2020; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). Victims must cope with ongoing personal and psychological trauma, with the distributed sexual materials continuing to haunt NCDII victims throughout their lives (Kamal & Newman, 2016), even if the material is taken down. In many cases, the identities and personal details of the victim are also shared, thereby both exacerbating the distress experienced and giving license to other internet users to abuse and stalk the victim (Yar & Drew, 2020). Both types of offences can destroy relationships, lead to unemployment, and severely diminish future employment, education and relationship prospects (Magaldi et al., 2020; Short et al., 2017); they can also trigger physical ailments like fatigue, nausea and the aggravation of existing medical conditions (Magaldi et al., 2020). Psychologically, many victims suffer from anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms including insomnia, hypervigilance, and flashbacks (Fahmy et al., 2024; Flynn et al., 2016; Murça et al., 2023). At the extreme end, suicide remains the most serious consequence that some victims face (Magaldi et al., 2020). Overall, the extant evidence suggests that the humiliation and mental anguish stemming from NCDII can utterly derail victims' lives and careers. The ongoing nature of the abuse and the inability to fully escape the publicly shared images makes NCDII a uniquely traumatic crime conducive to repeated victimization (Hearn & Hall, 2022). It is therefore imperative that NCDII be acknowledged as a severe form of abuse warranting a similar level of support and intervention as PSA.

Attitudes

In addition to their harmful consequences, attitudes towards NCDII and PSA victims also exhibit several parallels. Like PSA victims, NCDII victims are often not viewed as credible and are subject to victim blaming (Bates, 2017; Call, 2021). These attitudes are pervasive, where victims may

be faulted for behaviors like consenting to being photographed/videoed or taking the images themselves (Attrill-Smith et al., 2021; Call, 2021; Gavin & Scott, 2019; Tinsley et al., 2021), which likely exacerbates the immense social, financial, and psychological impact of their victimization (Flynn et al., 2016). Mirroring how rape victims are often blamed when perceived as "asking for trouble" by wearing immodest clothing (Buddie & Miller, 2001), NCDII victims face increased blame when more explicit images are involved (Bradbury, 2023). This blame stems from a perception that they were not "sensible" in sharing those images (Tinsley et al., 2021), echoing the victim-blaming mindset seen in PSA cases (Bates, 2017).

In a study by Gavin and Scott (2019), half of male participants and 62.5% of female participants attributed at least some responsibility to the victim if they had initially consented to taking the explicit material. Although the victim described in this study only consented to the taking of the images, not their distribution, they were not seen as fully absolved of responsibility by the study participants. These findings are mirrored in Call's (2021) research, where nearly half (48%) of the participants agreed that NCDII victims are at least partly responsible for their victimization because they originally created and shared the material, even if they did not consent to its distribution.

Furthermore, similarly to PSA cases, male victims of NCDII are often shamed. It is widely believed that, instead of feeling distress, they should be flattered. This framing regards male NCDII victimization as an ego boost because of the assumption that the perpetrator's actions stemmed from physical attraction towards the victim (Gavin & Scott, 2019). This rhetoric is reminiscent of common misperceptions about male PSA victims (Sable et al., 2006; Thomas & Kopel, 2023; Turchik & Edwards, 2012).

Despite the vast number of similarities between PSA and NCDII victimization reported in the literature, Gibbard and Fido (2023) found that participants judged NCDII cases more leniently than PSA cases. They propose that these judgements may be due to the lack of immediate physical injuries that are synonymous with rape cases (e.g., bruises, lacerations, STIs), which contribute to the belief that NCDII victims experience comparatively little harm. Nonetheless, other studies have found that NCDII victims are frequently blamed for their victimization (Attrill-Smith et al., 2021; Tinsley et al., 2021). This contradiction highlights the complex nature of public perceptions towards NCDII victims and underscores the need for further research to better understand the factors influencing these attitudes. Furthermore, societal attitudes and perceptions also play a crucial role in determining the level of support for legal measures against NCDII.

Support for Criminalization

There is widespread support for the criminalization of NCDII (Lageson et al., 2018), with both victims and non-victims equally agreeing that it should be a crime (Henry et al., 2019). However, in some instances, this support has caveats that further exacerbate victim blaming. Call (2021)

found that over one-third of their participants were supportive only if the victim never shared the explicit material in the first place. Meanwhile, Henry et al. (2019) observed some notable gender differences. In their study, women (84%) were more supportive of criminalization than men (77%), and men (49%) were significantly more likely than women (32%) to hold harm minimization attitudes and victim-blaming attitudes (Henry et al., 2019). Similarly, Bothamley and Tully (2017) found that men rated police intervention for NCDII as significantly less necessary than women did. Furthermore, while there is support for NCDII criminalization, it drops considerably when the victim self-produces the intimate material, suggesting that support is influenced by victim culpability (Lageson et al., 2018). Likewise, some believe that if the victim did not explicitly ask for the material to be kept private, then sharing and distributing it should not be considered a crime (Gavin & Scott, 2019).

Right-Wing Authoritarianism

These tendencies to shift blame onto NCDII victims and minimize the harm may stem from deeply rooted societal attitudes and belief systems. One such belief system is Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). Altemeyer (1981) originally conceptualized RWA as comprising authoritarian aggression (punitive attitudes toward those who deviate from conventional values), authoritarian submission (placing high value on obedience and respect for authority) and conventionalism (adherence to traditional values). This attitudinal orientation often predicts beliefs and behaviors related to diverse social issues (Canto et al., 2020), including various forms of prejudice, ethnocentrism, and homophobia (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007; Felix & Chaube, 2021; Gormley & Lopez, 2010).

Sexism is another key form of such prejudice (Manoussaki & Veitch, 2015; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007). The conventionalism dimension of RWA encompasses the value and motivational goal of maintaining traditional lifestyles, norms, and morality, and resisting “modern” norms. Individuals who score high on RWA tend to also uphold traditional gender roles (Carr, 2006). Along with perpetuating sexism and traditional gender roles, RWA endorses traditional double standards, especially regarding sex and sexual behavior (Jussim et al., 2015; Spaccatini et al., 2019). These double standards are inherently sexist, as they typically result in harsher judgements of women's sexual behavior than men's (Marks et al., 2018). This sexist perspective contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality and discrimination. These double standards can significantly influence attitudes towards victims of sexual aggression.

Multiple studies have found that RWA can lead to victim-blaming and minimization of harm to PSA victims (Canto et al., 2020; Carr, 2006; Manoussaki & Veitch, 2015; Niemi & Young, 2016). Manoussaki and Veitch (2015) argue that RWA may give rise to the perception of rape as not a violent crime, but a valid response to provocative behavior. Although these studies have thus far only explored judgements of PSA victims, given

NCDII's sweeping similarities to PSA, it is plausible that extant findings may also be extended to judgements of NCDII victims. While there is very limited research surrounding RWA's relationship with attitudes towards IBSA victims, Tinsley et al. (2021) observed that participants who strongly endorsed gender roles perceived the victim as more blameworthy and promiscuous, a finding that mirrors previous studies (Morris, 2017; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007). Furthermore, in a study by Harper et al. (2023), these perceptions of NCDII victims were also positively associated with political conservatism, a construct with parallels to aspects of RWA.

On the contrary, using RWA's fundamental ideas around morality, relationships and traditionalism, Gauthier (2023) posits that images produced within a romantic relationship tend to be accompanied by expectations of privacy and respect, rendering any non-consensual sharing of such images as a morally condemnable breach of trust. Therefore, it is possible that those with stronger RWA attitudes may have more sympathetic views towards NCDII victims. Thus, the relationship between RWA and attitudes towards NCDII victims may be more complex than initially apparent. Empathy may play a key role in explaining this relationship.

Empathy

RWA has been theoretically and empirically linked to decreased empathy (Roy et al., 2021). McFarland (2010) observed that as empathy increases, general prejudice and negative attitudes associated with RWA decrease, suggesting that empathy may act as a buffer against the tendency to hold higher RWA ideologies. Empathy is commonly delineated into two types: affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy (CE) encompasses the ability to understand the emotions of others (Reniers et al., 2011), while affective empathy (AE) represents the ability to vicariously experience and share others' emotions. Lower empathy is associated with negative and victim-blaming attitudes towards rape victims (Harper et al., 2023; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Specifically, Smith and Frieze (2003) found that those taking the victim's perspective reported significantly less victim-blame. In their study, higher empathy for the victim was correlated with perceiving the rape as more psychologically damaging, suggesting that AE builds empathy for victims, reducing victim-blaming. Similarly to RWA, research on empathy in relation to NCDII victims is scant. Nonetheless, previous studies have shown that Dark Triad personality traits, which are characterized by low empathy, are consistently related to negative judgements of IBSA victims (Fido et al., 2025; Harper et al., 2023) and proclivity to commit NCDII (Fido et al., 2024; Karasavva & Forth, 2022; Swanek, 2022). Furthermore, Harper et al. (2023) found that lower levels of empathy were related to underestimating or downplaying the harm and suffering experienced by victims of IBSA offences.

The Current Study

As IBSA offences rise, public attitudes toward victims remain understudied compared to PSA. RWA beliefs rooted in conventionalism, obedience to authority, and punitiveness have been previously shown to predict victim-blaming in sexual assault. Examining if this extends to technologically-facilitated crimes like IBSA is crucial, given the strong evidence that this type of victimization shares many characteristics with PSA. Additionally, empathy's potential moderating role in shaping RWA adherents' views of NCDII victims warrants investigation, as empathy may buffer RWA's prejudicial attributes. This research therefore aimed to investigate associations between RWA and judgements of NCDII victims, and whether empathy moderates these relationships. The following hypotheses were tested:

H1 - Higher scores on RWA will predict more negative judgements of NCDII victims

H2 – Cognitive empathy will significantly moderate the relationship between RWA and judgements of NCDII victims.

H3 – Affective empathy will significantly moderate the relationship between RWA and judgements of NCDII victims.

Materials and Methods

Design

A cross-sectional design was used to test the hypotheses. The independent variable (X) was RWA score, and the dependent variables (Y_1 to Y_4) were scores on four facets of beliefs about revenge porn (Victims as Promiscuous, Victim Harm, Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior, and Offense Minimization). Affective empathy (W_1) and cognitive empathy (W_1) represented moderator variables.

Participants

Using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009), an *a priori* power analysis for linear multiple regression (fixed model, R^2 increase) indicated a minimum sample size of $n = 94$ was required to detect a medium effect ($f^2 = 0.15$), power = 0.80, with two tested predictors and five total predictors, $\alpha = .0125$. Using convenience sampling, participants were recruited on social media (Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram). Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18+ and fluent in English. There were no other exclusion criteria. After removing incomplete responses ($n = 58$) and outliers ($n = 4$), the final sample comprised 134 adults (95 female, 29 male, 10 non-binary). Age ranged from 18-51 ($M = 25.25$, $SD = 7.134$). The majority of participants self-identified as White ($n = 113$, 84.3%), followed by Asian ($n = 11$, 8.2%). No incentives were offered for participation.

Materials

Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy

The Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE; Reniers et al., 2011) is a 30-item instrument designed to measure cognitive (19 items; e.g., “I can easily work out what another person might want to talk about”; $\alpha = .74$) and affective (12 items; e.g., “People I am with have a strong influence on my mood”; $\alpha = .89$) empathy. Participants responded to each item using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 4 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the corresponding empathy component.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale

The Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer, 2006) is a 22-item self-report questionnaire measuring authoritarian tendencies and beliefs associated with right-wing ideologies (e.g., “What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path”). Participants rated each item using a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 9 (very strongly agree). Higher scores indicate stronger adherence to right-wing authoritarian beliefs. In this study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$).

Beliefs about Revenge Pornography Questionnaire

Beliefs about NCDII and judgements towards its victims were assessed using the Beliefs about Revenge Pornography Questionnaire (BRPQ; Harper et al., 2023). The scale has 45 items, segmented into four subscales: Victims as Promiscuous (15 items; e.g., “Victims of revenge pornography enjoy the attention it brings”; $\alpha = .93$), Victim Harm (13 items; e.g., “Being a victim of revenge pornography can cause psychological distress”; $\alpha = .95$), Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior (10 items; e.g., “People should not allow their partner to take a nude picture of them”; $\alpha = .85$), and Offense Minimization (7 items; e.g., “Being a victim of revenge pornography isn’t as bad as being raped”; $\alpha = .74$). Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of the respective subscale.

Procedure

Following ethical approval from the College of Health, Psychology, and Social Care at the researchers’ university, prospective participants viewed the study invitation on social media, they navigated to the study on Qualtrics. After reading an information sheet about the study, they gave their consent and demographic information. They then completed the three questionnaires, presented in random order to control for order effect. After re-consenting to the use of their data in this study, they were debriefed and thanked for their time.

Results

First, data were screened for missing data points, outliers, and violations of parametric assumptions. Means and standard deviations for each variable are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for all Study Variables, Grouped by Gender

Variable	Total Sample (n = 134)		Male (n = 29)		Female (n = 95)		Non-Binary (n = 10)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Right-Wing Authoritarianism (X)	62.58	25.90	69.48	35.22	62.82	22.52	40.30	7.29
Victim as Promiscuous (Y ₁)	17.65	5.85	22.45	9.19	16.34	3.74	16.10	1.60
Victim Harm (Y ₂)	57.48	9.69	50.10	13.47	59.37	7.48	60.90	3.67
Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior (Y ₃)	17.34	6.63	20.79	8.06	16.65	6.03	13.90	3.21
Offence Minimization (Y ₄)	17.98	5.12	21.86	5.89	16.60	4.15	19.80	5.16
Affective empathy (W ₁)	38.14	8.91	39.45	10.92	37.14	8.29	43.90	5.45
Cognitive empathy (W ₂)	25.07	5.20	24.69	6.20	22.60	4.31	20.10	3.21

Bivariate correlations (Table 2) showed that the four subscales of the BRPQ were all significantly correlated with one another, with positive associations between all subscales except Victim Harm, which was negatively associated with the other subscales. Victim Harm was also significantly negatively associated with RWA and cognitive empathy. RWA and cognitive empathy were also significantly positively associated with the other three BRPQ subscales, and with one another. Lastly, affective empathy was significantly, positively associated with cognitive empathy and Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior, but was not significantly correlated with any other variables.

Table 2*Correlations Between All Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Right-Wing Authoritarianism	-						
2. Victim as Promiscuous	.55***	-					
3. Victim Harm	-.66***	-.79***	-				
4. Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior	.57***	.583***	-.53***	-			
5. Offense Minimization	.17*	.48***	-.45***	.40***	-		
6. Cognitive Empathy	.28***	.27**	-.27***	.31***	.26**	-	
7. Affective Empathy	-.02	.14	-.01	.17*	.06	.28***	-

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$ **Regressions**

Next, a series of linear regressions were conducted to explore the relationships between RWA (X) and the four BRPQ subscales (Y₁ to Y₄). To mitigate risk of Type I error, a Bonferroni correction was applied, resulting in an adjusted significance threshold of $p = 0.0125$. All regression results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3*Regression Models of RWA Scores Predicting BRPQ Scores*

	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>				
Victim as Promiscuous (Y ₁)	2.243	1.795	3.069	.332	.549*	.302	.297
Victim Harm (Y ₂)	-1.769	-2.114	-1.425	.174	-.662*	.438	.434
Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior (Y ₃)	2.228	1.675	2.781	.280	.570*	.325	.320
Offense Minimization (Y ₄)	.858	-.001	1.716	.434	.169	.029	.021

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE* = standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; R^2 = variance accounted for by the model; ΔR^2 = adjusted R^2 .

* $p \leq 0.001$

RWA was a significant predictor of viewing the victim as promiscuous, $F(1, 132) = 57.077$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .302$, victim harm, $F(1, 132) = 102.962$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .438$, and avoiding vulnerable behavior, $F(1, 132) = 63.550$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .325$. The model predicts that a one unit increase in RWA would correspond with a 2.243 unit increase in viewing the victim as promiscuous; a 1.769 unit decrease in viewing the victim as harmed by NCDII; and a 2.228 unit increase in viewing NCDII

victimization as avoidable and regarding victims as responsible for their victimization. However, RWA did not significantly predict offence minimization, $F(1, 132) = 3.901, p = .050, R^2 = .029$.

Moderation Analyses

Following the correlation and regression results, moderation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro v4.2 (Hayes, 2022). Using only the variables that showed significant relationships with one another in the correlation and regression analyses, the moderation analyses therefore tested whether cognitive empathy (W) moderated the relationships between RWA (X) and Victim as Promiscuous (Y_1), Victim Harm (Y_2), and Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior (Y_3).

Cognitive empathy did not moderate the relationships between RWA and Victim as Promiscuous, $\Delta R^2 = .001, \Delta F(3, 130) = .210, p = .647$, Victim Harm, $\Delta R^2 = .000, \Delta F(3, 130) = .046, p = .830$, or Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior, $\Delta R^2 = .001, \Delta F(3, 130) = .227, p = .635$.

Discussion

Despite non-consensual distribution of intimate images (NCDII) being argued as similar in characteristics and attitudes to physical sexual abuse (PSA), scant research has explored how personality orientations predict attitudes towards victims of NCDII. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relationship between Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and attitudes towards victims of NCDII, while also investigating the moderating effects of cognitive and affective empathy on this relationship.

Based on previous research (e.g., Canto et al., 2020; Carr, 2006; Manoussaki & Veitch, 2015; Niemi & Young, 2016), it was hypothesized that higher levels of RWA will significantly predict negative attitudes towards victims of NCDII across the various dimensions of victimization included in the Beliefs about Revenge Pornography Questionnaire (BRPQ; Harper et al., 2023). The results supported this hypothesis, suggesting that this personality attribute was associated with viewing NCDII victims as promiscuous, unharmed, and responsible for their victimization. These findings contribute to existing research on sexual victimization, particularly regarding how RWA can lead to negative and victim-blaming attitudes towards people who experience NCDII victimization. This pattern of results extends previous research by Canto et al. (2020) and Manoussaki and Veitch (2015), which established RWA as a predictor of victim-blaming attitudes in physical sexual assault (PSA) cases. Crucially, these findings suggest that RWA's influence on such attitudes transcends traditional forms of sexual violence, extending to technology-facilitated sexual abuse offences like NCDII, thus broadening our understanding of the pervasive impact of authoritarian ideologies on perceptions of sexual victimization. This evidence supports McGlynn et al.'s (2017) argument that NCDII and other forms of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) should be regarded as existing on the same spectrum as PSA.

When examining the results in more detail, the significant relationship between RWA and viewing victims as promiscuous can be explained through the lens of RWA's conventionalism component, which emphasizes adherence to traditional values and gender roles (Altemeyer, 1981). This finding corroborates and extends Tinsley et al.'s (2021) research, which demonstrated that stronger endorsement of traditional gender roles correlates with increased victim-blaming in NCDII cases. These results also support research by Bradbury (2023), who found that NCDII victims are rated as more promiscuous when the images in question involve higher levels of exposure of intimate body parts. Thus, the connection between RWA and perceptions of victim promiscuity may be rooted in the authoritarian tendency to rigidly adhere to conventional sexual norms and to harshly judge individuals perceived as violating these norms.

Meanwhile, the negative relationship observed between RWA and victim harm suggests that individuals high in RWA may underestimate or downplay the negative impacts of NCDII on victims. This finding aligns with Harper et al.'s (2023) research on empathy and harm perception in IBSA cases, indicating a potential link between authoritarian attitudes and reduced recognition of victim suffering. This relationship may be explained by the authoritarian aggression component of RWA, which can manifest as a lack of sympathy for those perceived as deviating from social norms. For instance, those who score high on this trait may regard taking intimate images of oneself as a deviant behavior, and NCDII victims as experiencing less harm than victims of physical sexual assault, given the lack of physical contact involved in an NCDII offence. Nonetheless, mounting research evidence points to the severity of harm experienced by NCDII victims, with negative consequences mirroring that seen in PSA victims (Hearn & Hall, 2022; Magaldi et al., 2020; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017).

Furthermore, this finding may suggest that high-RWA individuals may participate in the minimization of consequences and harm to male victims, particularly in the sense that they should be flattered, and that the perpetrator must have found him attractive in cases of NCDII victimization (Gavin & Scott, 2019). This would echo a pervasive finding in PSA research, where male victims are dismissed as a result of misconceptions and outdated ideas about the nature of male sexual assault victimization by female perpetrators (Sable et al., 2006; Thomas & Kopel, 2023; Turchik & Edwards, 2012).

Next, the relationship between RWA and the avoiding vulnerable behavior subscale is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that those high in RWA may place greater emphasis on victims' responsibility to protect themselves. This aligns with Call's (2021) findings, which showed that a substantial portion of participants attributed partial responsibility to victims who initially created or shared intimate material, in contrast to those whose images were taken without their knowledge or consent. This tendency may be understood through the lens of the just-world hypothesis (Lerner & Miller, 1978), which is often associated with authoritarian beliefs and leads

individuals to assume that victims must have done something to deserve their fate. These results are supported by Tinsley et al. (2021), who proposed the idea that victims are perceived as not being 'sensible' when sharing images, which suggests that their victimization could have been avoided had they not taken/shared those intimate images. This can also be seen in Gavin and Scott's (2019) research, where over half of their participants attributed at least some responsibility to the victim if they had initially consented to taking the intimate images, which contributed to their victimization.

Lastly, it was unexpected that neither affective nor cognitive empathy moderated the relationships between RWA and beliefs about NCDII. Existing research has provided evidence that empathy does in fact act as a buffer for RWA beliefs, with McFarland (2010) finding that, as empathy increases, the negative and prejudicial attitudes associated with RWA decrease. Although scant, previous research has also shown that those with lower empathy are more likely to minimize or underestimate the harm and suffering experienced by victims of NCDII (Attrill-Smith et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2023).

However, despite existing literature providing some context as to why empathy may moderate the relationship between RWA and attitudes towards sexual crime victims, most of the extant research investigates PSA, with very few exploring NCDII and other IBSA offences. Therefore, the notion of empathy being a moderator was extrapolated from PSA research due to the idea that, because PSA and NCDII share many offence characteristics and victim impacts (McGlynn et al., 2017), empathy would moderate the relationship between RWA and attitudes towards victims of sexual crimes, regardless of its modality. However, these results suggest that, when it comes to the role of empathy, perhaps modality of the sexual crime does in fact matter. This divergence from PSA research highlights the unique nature of technology-facilitated sexual crimes and challenges the assumption of a uniform psychological response across different forms of sexual violence.

Perceived victim culpability in NCDII cases presents a unique challenge that may influence the moderating effect of empathy. Unlike PSA, NCDII cases sometimes involve an element of consensual image creation or sharing. This perceived voluntary involvement may lead to attributions of partial victim responsibility (Bothamley & Tully, 2017), thereby complicating empathic responses. For instance, Scott and Gavin (2018) found that individuals were more likely to blame NCDII victims when they had initially shared the image consensually. Meanwhile, Starr and Lavis (2018) note that in these cases, victim blaming often stems from the belief that victims should have foreseen potential consequences, aligning with the aforementioned just-world hypothesis and its association with RWA (Lerner & Miller, 1978). The concept of 'digital naive realism' (Powell et al., 2020) and deficits in media literacy may contribute to individuals failing to comprehend the complexities of digital information

sharing, leading to widespread victim-blaming attitudes. These findings collectively indicate that increased perceived victim culpability in NCDII cases introduces a layer of complexity not typically present in PSA cases, potentially explaining the lack of moderation effect of empathy in the current study.

Psychological distance in NCDII cases may also contribute to the disparate findings for empathy compared to PSA research. The online nature of NCDII can create a greater perceived distance between the victim and the observer (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This increased psychological distance could potentially attenuate the impact of empathy, especially when interacting with authoritarian tendencies associated with RWA. Livingstone and Smith (2014) suggest that the virtual nature of online interactions can lead to reduced empathy and increased antisocial behavior. In NCDII cases, this psychological distance may make it harder for individuals to fully empathize with victims, as the harm is not immediately visible or tangible (Cassidy et al., 2013). This can be linked to the argument made by Gibbard and Fido (2023), who suggest that due to the lack of immediate effects of NCDII, these cases are seen more leniently, as though NCDII has no consequences at all. Unlike PSA, the delayed and potentially ongoing nature of NCDII victimization might make it more challenging for observers to connect emotionally with the victim's experience (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Finally, the relatively recent emergence of NCDII as a recognized form of sexual violence means that societal narratives surrounding these offences are still evolving (McGlynn et al., 2017). This fluid social context may impact how empathy interacts with ideological beliefs in shaping attitudes towards victims. Unlike well-established narratives around PSA, public discourse on NCDII is still developing, potentially leading to more varied and unstable attitudes (Powell et al., 2020). Media representation of NCDII cases often focuses on victim behavior, which may reinforce victim-blaming narratives (Draper, 2012). The legal novelty of NCDII offences in many jurisdictions may also contribute to uncertainty in public perceptions, potentially influencing how empathy operates in these cases (Henry et al., 2019). These evolving narratives may interact with RWA beliefs in complex ways, possibly explaining the unexpected findings regarding empathy's moderating role in this study.

Implications and Future Directions

The significant relationship between RWA and negative attitudes towards victims of NCDII has important implications for both practice and research. These findings underscore the need for tailored interventions in victim support services and public awareness campaigns that address the link between ideological beliefs and perceptions of NCDII. Legal and policy approaches to IBSA may benefit from considering how underlying authoritarian attitudes contribute to victim-blaming, potentially using these findings to inform more victim-centric protocols. Furthermore, the findings from this study provide evidence the parallels between NCDII and PSA,

suggesting that PSA awareness initiatives can be extended to NCDII, improving public understanding of this technology-facilitated form of sexual abuse.

In therapeutic settings, practitioners working with both victims and perpetrators should be aware of how personality traits and orientations such as RWA might shape attitudes towards NCDII, adapting their approaches to target these factors. Additionally, psychologists and psychotherapists should encourage cognitive-behavioral techniques that challenge rigid thinking patterns and incorporate gradual exposure to alternative viewpoints in a non-threatening manner in order to broaden perspectives.

Future research should explore why empathy did not moderate the relationship between RWA and attitudes towards NCDII, as well as examining other potential moderators such as digital literacy or personal experience with technology-facilitated crimes. Longitudinal studies tracking attitude changes over time, particularly as legal and societal responses to NCDII evolve, would also be valuable. Cross-cultural research could further illuminate how these relationships vary across different societal contexts, contributing to a more global understanding of attitudes towards NCDII victims. Together, these research directions would not only enhance understanding of the psychological underpinnings of attitudes towards NCDII victims, but also contribute to more effective strategies for prevention, support, and attitude change in the face of evolving forms of technology-facilitated sexual abuse.

Limitations

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The sample size was modest, significantly limiting the ability to detect small effects or draw subgroup comparisons. Indeed, a power sensitivity analysis revealed that with our acquired sample size and power = .8, the effect size detectable was approximately $f^2 = .103$. Thus, our data was not sufficiently powered to detect smaller effects. Demographic biases could have also skewed the results, such as an overrepresentation of individuals from the UK or university students. Additionally, the use of an online survey may have excluded individuals with low digital literacy, potentially limiting the representativeness of the sample.

While focusing on RWA and empathy provides valuable insights, it may have overlooked other potentially influential factors. Digital literacy levels could significantly influence understanding and attitudes towards NCDII. Additionally, personal experiences with privacy violations might further affect empathy or victim-blaming tendencies in important ways. These factors should be explored in future studies in order to enhance our understanding of public attitudes towards NCDII.

Conclusion

This study revealed that higher levels of RWA predict more negative attitudes towards victims of NCDII, extending previous research findings

on PSA to digital contexts. This relationship was consistent across various aspects of victimization, although empathy did not moderate it. These findings highlight the importance of considering ideological beliefs in addressing NCDII and suggest that efforts to combat victim-blaming should consider the influence of authoritarian attitudes. Furthermore, the results underscore the parallels between attitudes towards NCDII and physical sexual assault victims, supporting the conceptualization of NCDII within the broader framework of sexual violence. While limited in scope, this study provides a foundation for future research on technology-facilitated sexual crimes and emphasizes the need for comprehensive approaches to prevention, support, and justice in the digital age.

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Availability of data and material

Data are available on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/57zc4/>.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Author's Contributions

All authors conceived of the study. RM supervised the research, provided written and verbal feedback at all stages of the research cycle, assisted with the ethics application, assisted with data analysis, and re-wrote the manuscript for publication. WB collected and analysed the data and wrote the first draft of the manuscript with assistance from RM.

Ethics Approval

The University of Derby College of Health, Psychology and Social Care Research Ethics Committee approved the project, "Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Empathy, and Judgements of Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Image (NCDII) Victims", in December 2023.

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