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Outcomes of women's experiences with non-consensual use of their sexual images

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Project title: Outcomes of women's experiences with non-consensual use of their sexual images (REB #18-001)

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Summary of Results: This study investigated social and psychological outcomes for women who had had a sexual image taken and/or used without consent. Research suggests that these experiences are relatively common, but not much is known about the psychological and social outcomes of these experiences and how these relate to traditional forms of sexual violence. It was hypothesized that similar to offline sexual violence, women would experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma. Due to the social nature of sharing images online, changes to peer, friend, family, and romantic relationships were also investigated. It was hypothesized that negative changes to these relationships would be associated with worse psychological outcomes. Adult women ($n = 152$) who reported having these experiences were recruited from the community and through the University of Windsor research participant pool. Online, participants provided a brief description of how their image was used and characteristics of the incident. Participants were asked about changes in their relationships with peers, friends, family, and romantic partners since the incident, as well as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma. Finally, women were asked to describe any positive outcomes they experienced following the incident. Overall, the majority of women reported low levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma. However, the results suggest that there are differences based on how an image was used and some characteristics, such as having an image taken or used in more than one way, may be associated with increased distress. Women experienced both positive and negative changes to their relationships, with some relationships becoming closer and others that were ended. Relationship changes did not predict psychological outcomes. Finally, some women identified positive or strengths-based outcomes (e.g., strengthening of relationships) that occurred through the process of healing from these incidents. The current findings suggest that women experience a wide range of incidents and outcomes, and more research is needed on this emerging phenomenon.