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Women's experiences of non-consensual use of their sexual images: Study 2

Michelle A. Krieger, MA

This study explored how women conceptualized (thought and felt about) and labeled experiences of image-based sexual exploitation (IBSE). That is, incidents where a sexual image was taken and/or shared of them without consent. The first research question (RQ1) asked: how do women think and feel about incidents of IBSE? Second, this study explored changes in how women thought and felt about the incidents at different points in time (i.e., between the time they first learned of their image being used to their thoughts and feelings at the time of the study) using a cross-sectional method and asking women to reflect on two time points (RQ2). Lastly, this study examined how women labeled or conceptualized their experiences (RQ3). To answer these questions, an inductive qualitative approach was selected to analyze women's experiences.

38 women who had a sexual image taken and/or used without consent were recruited online using advertisements on social media and bulletin board websites as well as from an email list of (university and community) participants from the previous study interested in additional research projects. Approximately 60% of the sample was recruited online from the community. The women were an average of 27.8 years old ($SD = 11.2$ years) and the sample was 60.5% white and 52.6% were students. First the women provided information about the incident (i.e., what happened and when it occurred) and then completed a series of open-ended questions about their experiences. The women were asked what they thought and felt about the incident at the time it first occurred and at the present time as well as what they would call the incident if they had to give it a label. Thematic analysis was used to analyze themes that across the past and present data sets before looking for differences between them and to analyze how women labeled their experiences.

In RQ1, women's thoughts and feelings were organized into themes that fell into two broad conceptual categories – themes that pertained to immediate reactions and emotions (e.g., anger, shock, fear, sadness) and themes that involved some sort of meaning-making or reflection (perpetrator blame, self blame, learning experience, or lasting negative experience). When women's thoughts and feelings at the time of the incident were compared to those at the time of participation (RQ2), themes that pertained to emotions (i.e., Anger, Fear, Hurt, Sadness, and Shame) all decreased over time and the theme of Shock ceased to be present at all. The themes that increased were those that involved reflection or meaning-making (i.e., Betrayal, Perpetrator Blame, and Self Blame), including two themes – Lasting Impact and Moving On - that were only found in the second data set, meaning once time had passed since the incident first occurred.

When asked to label the incident (RQ3), women's responses fell into six broad themes. These were: Breach of Trust; Learning Experience; Negative Experience; Revenge; Taken Advantage Of, and; Victimization. Women most commonly labeled their experiences as a breach of trust (betrayal) and no women had labels that explicitly included a gendered dimension, such as violence against women. Two themes – Learning Experience and Negative Experience – reflected on the impact of the incident in the women's lives, either as a source of growth or as a source of ongoing negative (social or emotional) effects. Women often described their experience in terms of more than one of these labels, illustrating the complex and multiple ways that women may make sense of these experiences.