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Image-Based Sexual Abuse: An Overview

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What is Image-Based Sexual Abuse?

Sexual violence that involves the creation and distribution of sexually explicit or sexualized images, videos, and other media has been termed image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) (McGlynn & Rackely, 2017). IBSA describes a wide range of harmful activities that weaponize sexually explicit or sexualized materials against the persons they depict through the production of these materials and the nonconsensual distribution or threat of distribution (National Center on Sexual Exploitation [NCOSE], 2024). IBSA includes activities and materials such as nonconsensual sext dissemination, nonconsensual pornography (formerly referred to as "revenge porn"), sextortion, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to create deepfake[1] pornography. Using the umbrella term of IBSA to categorize these behaviors creates an encompassing description that reflects the non-consensual and abusive nature of these actions as well as their interconnectedness (McGlynn et al., 2017). Therefore, IBSA will be the general term used throughout this report unless discussing a specific type of IBSA. It is important to note that although child sexual abuse material (CSAM), often referred to as "child pornography,"[2] technically qualifies as IBSA, CSAM is a distinct class of material and is illegal under U.S. federal statutes (NCOSE, 2024) and will not be included in this report. Table 1 provides a list of terms, definitions, and alternate terms that are all considered IBSA.

Sexual content requires consent at two stages: when the content is created and when it is shared/distributed to others (End Cyber Abuse, 2022). Thus, there are three broad categories of IBSA: content that is non-consensually created and non-consensually distributed, consensually created but non-conceptually distributed, and then a third category of non-consensual fake or altered sexual content (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). There is also the possibility that IBSA occurs without any sexual content, such as "sextortion." This involves an individual attempting to blackmail someone by claiming that they will distribute the victim's sexual content if they do not meet their demands. However, the perpetrator does not have any sexual content; instead, they are attempting to manipulate the victim through threats (Carlton, 2020). These three categories, coupled with the range of acts that comprise IBSA and the shame and stigma surrounding sexual violence, can complicate attempts to understand the magnitude of the problem, including the prevalence, demographics and characteristics of victims and perpetrators, as well as the consequences for the victims who experience IBSA.

Prevalence of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

The advancement and accessibility of technology and the internet have facilitated new methods to commit sexual violence. IBSA is a serious type of sexual abuse that is increasing in prevalence and with potentially devastating consequences. Research has increasingly struggled to address the ever-changing nature of these crimes, and this complicates estimates of the prevalence and characteristics of IBSA perpetration and victimization.

The findings of research conducted thus far indicate that IBSA perpetration rates range from 1.4% to 26%, and victimization rates range from 8% to 63.7% (Paradiso et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2022; Walker & Sleath, 2017). Although these prevalence rates vary widely, these studies focused on specific types of IBSA rather than the broad category, meaning that the overall prevalence rates of any IBSA are most likely on the higher end of these ranges, possibly much higher. Additionally, as displayed in Table 1, there is a wide range of IBSA activities and terms used for those activities, which add to the difficulty in researching IBSA prevalence.

Complicating the dynamics and understanding of IBSA is that individuals may not know that sexual content of them has been created (e.g., hidden cameras), acquired (e.g., when accounts or devices are hacked), or if it is unclear to viewers if the content has been created and/or distributed consensually (e.g., pornography videos that display non-consensual activities; Henry & Flynn, 2019).

[1] The U.S. Government Accountability Office's Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics Team (2020) defines deepfake as "a video, photo, or audio recording that seems real but has been manipulated with AI. The underlying technology can replace faces, manipulate facial expressions, synthesize faces, and synthesize speech" (p. 1).
[2] The U.S. Department of Justice (2023) defines child pornography as "any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a person less than 18 years old" (p. 1). Even though the term is widely known and currently used in federal statutes, in 2016, an international working group comprised of countries and international organizations across the world working to combat child exploitation formally recognized child sexual abuse material (CSAM) as the preferred term as it better reflects the abuse that is depicted in the images/videos and the resulting trauma.

Table 1. Alphabetized List of Image-Based Sexual Abuse Related Terms & Definitions

Term	Definition
Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)	Encompasses a range of harmful activities that weaponize sexually explicit or sexualized materials against the persons they depict. IBSA includes the creation, theft, extortion, threatened or actual distribution, or any use of sexually explicit or sexualized materials without the meaningful consent of the person or persons depicted and/or for purposes of sexual exploitation. *Alternate Terms: Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence*
Nonconsensual Distribution of Sexually Explicit Materials (NDSEM)	The sharing or online posting of sexually explicit or sexualized images/videos of another person without their meaningful consent. *Alternate Terms: Revenge Porn; Cyber Rape; Digital Rape*
Recording Sexual Violence (RSV)	Taking pictures or creating videos of another person's sexual assault or rape.
Sexual Extortion (i.e., Sextortion)	The use of sexual images to blackmail the person (or persons) depicted.
Synthetic Sexually Explicit Material (SSEM)	The alteration of images of a person so that a person not in pornography appears to be in pornography, or to "strip" the person depicted of their clothing. *Alternate Terms: Deepfakes; Deepfake Pornography; Cheapfake Pornography*
Video Voyeurism	Filming or taking pictures of people engaged in private activities (e.g., changing clothes, using the toilet or showering, having sex in private) without their knowledge, or surreptitiously filming/taking pictures of their private body parts while they are in public. *Alternate Terms: Down Blousing; Upskirting*

Table Sources: NCOSE, 2022; 2023.

Thus, measuring how much IBSA occurs is difficult because individuals may not know they have been victimized and consumers may not know they are watching content that is displaying actual abuse. Additionally, survivors may be aware but choose not to formally report their victimization to authorities or participate in research.

Furthermore, IBSA often occurs concurrently with other types of abuse or invasions of privacy, such as intimate partner violence (i.e., domestic violence), hacking into personal devices or accounts, and doxing (posting personal information such as home addresses; Henry et al., 2018; NCOSE, 2023). The intersection of IBSA with other crimes may provide the opportunity for victims to pursue criminal charges against their abuser for the non-IBSA crimes, but this is not always the case. It also underscores the harm that IBSA may cause and minimizes the seriousness of these crimes.

Perpetrators of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Several studies have assessed the targets, motivations, demographics, and personality traits of individuals who perpetrate IBSA.

Paradiso and colleagues' (2023) recent systematic review of the literature found that across studies, perpetrators of IBSA were more likely to have antisocial personality traits (e.g., sadism, psychopathy, and narcissism), accept IBSA myths (i.e., minimizing harm and victim blaming), and participate in online sexual behaviors (e.g., online dating, sending sexual images of themselves). In terms of sexual orientation, some studies have found an association between LGBQ+ persons and perpetration, as those who identified as same-sex attracted and bisexual had an increased likelihood of perpetrating IBSA, while another study found no association between sexual orientation and IBSA perpetration (Paradiso et al., 2023).

Several studies have examined gender and IBSA offending, with many citing no differences and similar offending rates for men and women (Clancy et al., 2019; Flynn et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2019). Other studies have found that men offend at higher rates than women (Barrense-Dias et al., 2020; Garcia et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2019). This research has most often focused on cisgender men and women, and so our knowledge of nonbinary individuals and IBSA is limited. Often, these individuals are excluded from published studies due to the lower numbers of persons who identify as such (Powell et al., 2022).

Much of IBSA involves current or past romantic/sexual partners, although friends, acquaintances, family members, or strangers may share nonconsensual images of victims (Henry & Powell, 2018; Karasavva & Forth, 2022). Despite the fear of the stranger "online predator," stranger perpetration is much less common (Powell et al., 2022). This dynamic mirrors that of "offline" sexual violence, as most occurs between individuals who have some existing relationship (RAINN, 2017).

Motivations for IBSA often involve a sense of aggrieved entitlement and/or sexual entitlement (Karasava & Forth, 2022). Aggrieved entitlement is a sense of being wronged, humiliated, or denied something that is owed or belonging to the perpetrator (Kimmel, 2013). Sexual entitlement is when individuals believe they are deserving of certain sexual behaviors, favors, partners, etc., despite the needs, wishes, or boundaries of others (Richardson et al., 2017). Many perpetrators accept myths surrounding IBSA, either minimizing/denying the harm associated or asserting that victims themselves are to blame (Clancy et al., 2019; Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020).

Victims of Image-Based Sexual Abuse and the Victim-Offender Overlap

Research has found that women and LGBQ+ individuals are disproportionately affected by IBSA and are more likely to be victims than their male and heterosexual counterparts (Karasavva & Forth, 2021; Paradiso et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2020). However, as mentioned previously, research is mixed on the role of gender on IBSA. Some studies find that women are more often the victims of IBSA where distribution is the result (Karasavva & Forth, 2021), while men are more likely to experience threats to disseminate nonconsensual sexual materials (Eaton et al., 2022). Thus, it may be helpful to explore the nature of victimization by gender, as the experiences appear to differ.

Within IBSA, there is often overlap between victims and offenders, meaning that victims can also perpetrate these crimes (Karasavva & Forth, 2021). For LGBQ+ persons, they are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of IBSA. One explanation for this is that LGBQ+ individuals are more likely to engage in online sexual behaviors, which increases their risk for IBSA generally (Paradiso et al., 2023). Some assert that higher levels of victimization and perpetration are a function of more time spent online. For example, sexual minority groups often find safe spaces and support in online communities, which can create more opportunities for both online offending and victimization (Albury & Byron, 2016).

Similarly, antisocial personality traits (e.g., sadism, psychopathy, and narcissism) have been connected to antisocial online behaviors. Subsequently, those who are more likely to be involved in IBSA are more likely to have antisocial personality traits regardless of whether they are a victim or perpetrator (Paradiso et al., 2023).

Previous histories of IBSA victimization are associated with IBSA perpetration (Clancy et al., 2019; Karasavva & Forth, 2021), meaning that sometimes victims engage in retaliatory behavior after experiencing IBSA (Powell et al., 2022). Thus, victims and offenders often have similar traits and engage in similar behaviors, complicating the dynamics of IBSA and the response.

Negative Effects of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

The effects of IBSA are far-reaching, and although most IBSA does not include a physical element, survivors report experiencing negative effects similar to survivors of sexual assault (Bates, 2017). Sparks (2022) states that survivors are victimized by the "dark triad": the perpetrator, society, and themselves. Typically, only the direct harm caused by the perpetrator is discussed. However, survivors are also victimized by society via stereotypes, victim blaming, and the lack of help from the criminal justice system. Lastly, survivors may internalize what happened to them and engage in self-blame (Sparks, 2022). This may contribute to, or exacerbate, other negative outcomes associated with direct victimization.

Survivors of IBSA report negative mental health experiences such as stress, depression, anger, sleep disorders, PTSD, self-harm, negative changes to self-esteem, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Bates, 2017; McGlynn, 2021; Paradiso et al., 2023). They describe feeling a loss of control over their own bodies, images, sexuality, and online space, leading to hypervigilance and protective measures such as changing their social media accounts and phone numbers and constantly monitoring websites and social media platforms for any content in which they are depicted. Survivors may develop trust issues, making it difficult to form new relationships, or they may completely isolate themselves from both online and offline spaces and their support groups (i.e., family and friends; Bates, 2017; McGlynn, 2021; Paradiso et al., 2023).

Furthermore, IBSA may affect survivors in their school or work environments. Survivors report difficulty concentrating, missing work/class, changing jobs/schools, and in some cases, even losing their jobs or being kicked out of school when individuals become aware of the content (Bates, 2017; Paradiso et al., 2023). This can lead to financial strain, which may be compounded by costs related to the abuse, such as the removal of the content and legal representation (Paradiso et al., 2023).

Contemporary Image-Based Sexual Abuse: Deepfakes

Synthetic Sexually Explicit Material (SSEM) is defined as the "alteration of images of a person so that a person not in pornography appears to be in pornography, or to 'strip' the person depicted of their clothing" (NCOSE, 2023), or more commonly known as "deepfakes." The term was coined by Reddit user "u/deepfakes," who is credited with posting the first widely known deepfakes videos that depicted female celebrities in pornographic films on a Reddit thread in 2017 (Pascale, 2023).

Deepfakes are made using artificial intelligence (AI), which is becoming increasingly more accessible, affordable, and realistic (Pascale, 2023). Deepfakes can be extremely difficult to detect; even advanced detection software is only accurate about 65% of the time (Ferrer et al., 2020). Furthermore, because deepfake technology has legitimate uses, it is difficult to regulate.

Ajder and colleagues (2019) found that just in the top five deepfake websites, there were 14,678 deepfake videos, an almost 100% increase from the prior year. These videos had over 134.3 million views, with 96% being pornographic in nature. The researchers found that the nationality of the subjects included the U.S. (41%), South Korea (25%), the U.K. (12%), Canada (6%), and India (3%). All the videos depicted women. When examining deepfake pornography websites specifically, the researchers identified nine websites dedicated to deepfake pornography, and eight of the top ten pornography sites host deepfakes (Ajder et al., 2019).

Celebrities are often the targets of deepfake pornography due to their widespread notoriety and the availability of images and videos of them. Most recently, pop icon Taylor Swift was targeted when an AI-generated sexually explicit image of Swift spread across the social media platform "X" (formerly known as Twitter; Montgomery, 2024). In response, X made Swift unsearchable on the platform and removed the content. Unfortunately, the image was viewed 47 million times before it was removed. As a direct response to the situation, a group of bipartisan U.S. senators introduced a bill known as the Disrupt Explicit Forged Images and Non-Consensual Edits Act of 2024, or the "Defiance Act" (Montgomery, 2024; Reuters, 2024). However, this is not the first attempt to create federal legislation addressing IBSA.

Image-Based Sexual Abuse and the Law

In the U.S., 48 states, Washington D.C., and two territories (Puerto Rico and Guam) have laws against IBSA.[3] Notably, there is no federal law against IBSA (Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, 2024). The challenges in creating a federal IBSA law have stemmed from arguments that such a law would violate First Amendment rights (Pascale, 2023). However, it is argued that IBSA should be added to the current list of unprotected speech, which includes obscenity, defamation, child pornography, and other types of speech (Pascale, 2023).

Without a federal law for guidance, each state is free to develop its own response to IBSA. For example, Texas has laws that cover many types of IBSA, including a recent amendment that added deepfake pornography, under Texas Penal Code §21.16 (Unlawful Disclosure or Promotion of Intimate Visual Material) and §21.165 (Unlawful Production or Distribution of Certain Sexually Explicit Videos; Relationship Privacy Act, 2015). While these laws are progressive in acknowledging the harms of IBSA, this legislation does not currently require agencies to collect comprehensive data on how often individuals are charged, prosecuted, adjudicated, or pursue redress in civil court. However, there have been several highly publicized cases across the country.

For example, a woman in Texas recently filed a harassment lawsuit against her former boyfriend, who posted intimate images of her on social media platforms and pornography websites, tagged her employer and gym, and sent the links to her friends and family. The lawsuit also stated that her former boyfriend hacked into a home security system to spy on the woman, sent threatening texts, and used her personal bank account to pay his bills. In 2023, she was awarded $1.2 billion in a settlement, which her lawyer described as a symbolic win for victims of IBSA that hopefully sends a message of deterrence (Brooks, 2023). This judgment could encourage other IBSA victims, including those from other states, to come forward and seek their own retribution.

Combatting Image-Based Sexual Abuse

There are four key ways to combat IBSA: (1) creating a federal law; (2) governance by online platforms; (3) education; and (4) supporting and empowering survivors. The lack of federal laws against IBSA creates several problems, such as jurisdictional issues, especially with the capability of these crimes to not only cross state lines but also international borders (Henry & Witt, 2021). Additionally, local and state law enforcement may lack the abilities and resources to police, investigate, and prosecute these crimes (Cole et al., 2020). This places the onus on victims to monitor websites, report the content, and find support all while potentially experiencing the negative effects of victimization. Therefore, creating a federal law for IBSA, and providing the resources to implement and enforce the law, is an essential component of combatting IBSA.

Another stakeholder that should be responsible for monitoring and removing IBSA content and developing and enforcing policies against IBSA are online platforms and websites (e.g., Google, Meta, Pornhub, TikTok; Henry et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the Communications Decency Act of 1996 grants them legal immunity against harmful content posted by their users (Henry et al., 2021). This leaves the level of detection and punishment up to the individual platforms/websites and allows perpetrators to take advantage of those who choose to have little or no oversight. Although online platforms do not have the same capabilities as law enforcement, they are still able to issue warnings, remove content, limit access, or disable/permanently suspend accounts at their discretion. Additionally, they can enable the reporting of harmful content by other users on the platforms and work with law enforcement and other organizations to combat IBSA (Henry et al., 2021).

[3] The two states that do not currently have laws against IBSA are South Carolina and Massachusetts.

Education on what IBSA is, its consequences, and how to support victims is critical and may reduce IBSA and improve efforts in creating a federal law. In some cases, it may be that individuals may not be aware that what they are doing is illegal (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011). To be clear, education should include literacy and should not be used as a scare tactic or to shame individuals into not participating in the consensual creation and/or sharing of sexual content. Such consensual sexual activities can be a part of developing sexual competency and healthy sexual relationships (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Education should include the legal and personal ramifications of IBSA. This is particularly important with "sexting," defined as "sending or receiving self-produced sexual material via mobile technology and social networking websites" (Krieger, 2017, p. 593), on the rise among teens with the belief that this is normative romantic or dating behavior. Many minors have even been prosecuted for child sexually abusive materials (CSAM) after engaging in what they thought was consensual sexting (Wolak at el., 2012), which underscores the need for early education. Furthermore, law enforcement and health care providers should be educated about this type of abuse and how to properly provide for survivors.

Lastly, supporting and empowering survivors is crucial. How victims/survivors of IBSA are treated matters, as unreported sexual violence is a serious issue. Holding victims/survivors responsible for the ways in which perpetrators abuse, threaten, and intimidate them directly negates perpetrator accountability. As it is critical not to blame, shame, or punish victims/survivors for engaging in normative sexual behaviors, conversations about consent, sexuality, and potential consequences must occur with more frequency and include more than abstinence-only education. Additionally, helping survivors develop positive coping skills is fundamental to their healing.

Including victims/survivors in education, legislation, and advocacy can be one way in which they can regain control over what has happened to them and use their own experiences to help others (Kristof, 2024; Rackley et al., 2021). For example, one of the most prominent champions for survivors is attorney Carrie Goldberg, herself a survivor of image-based sexual abuse. She is one of the leaders of the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, an organization that advocates for legislation to prevent and respond to image-based sexual abuse. Other survivors, including Francesca Mani and Breeze Liu, have created websites and founded start-ups to bring attention to the need for prevention and intervention. Research that centers the voices of victims/survivors in making policy recommendations demonstrates that they would like for corporate actors to take a more active role in harm reduction, more formalized education and outreach, stronger support systems and communities for victims/survivors, better reporting systems, and cultural changes regarding attitudes and norms toward image-based sexual abuse (Eaton et al., 2024).

Discussion

As technology has developed and advanced, individuals increasingly negotiate their sexuality through apps and online platforms (Henry & Powell, 2015a). The umbrella term of image-based sexual abuse more comprehensively captures how individuals have utilized this technology to harm others. There is a myriad of acts that can be included in IBSA. However, there is a commonality that runs through all these behaviors, and that is the weaponization of tech to engage in gender-based violence against women. The empirical knowledge of IBSA continues to grow, but neither research nor the law presently matches the growth and adaptability of IBSA perpetration. For this reason, education is imperative. Creating awareness of what IBSA is, what behaviors are considered IBSA, and how to prevent and respond to IBSA are methods that can help to inform and remove the stigma and shame that so often surrounds topics involving sexuality. Sexual violence thrives on silence, and IBSA is no exception. The responsibility for the misuse of sexual materials is not the victim's fault, as perpetrators often facilitate the myth that the victim is responsible through attempts to isolate, humiliate, manipulate, and control. So often, these crimes are committed within the context of known relationships, and awareness and education must reflect the reality of these crimes. IBSA is a gendered crime that is disproportionately experienced by women (Henry & Powell, 2015b; McGlynn et al., 2017). Policy and practice must center the experiences of survivors and remain focused on holding perpetrators accountable for the actions in which they engage.

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