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Abstract | Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual creation, distribution or threatened distribution of nude or sexual images. This research examines the prevalence, nature and impacts of IBSA victimisation and perpetration in Australia.

This form of abuse was found to be relatively common among respondents surveyed and to disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability, homosexual and bisexual people and young people. The nature of victimisation and perpetration was found to differ by gender, with males more likely to perpetrate IBSA, and females more likely to be victimised by a partner or ex-partner.

Image-based sexual abuse: Victims and perpetrators

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In 2014, hundreds of private, intimate images of celebrities were posted to a US-based website in exchange for bitcoins, a digital currency used to facilitate online transactions. The images had been stolen via a breach of Apple's iCloud (an online platform for backing up photos from Mac devices) and were later disseminated by traders and sellers through social media sites including Twitter, Tumblr and Reddit. Likewise, in June 2015, over 400 nude images of South Australian women and girls were published on a US-based noticeboard site, without the consent of those depicted. The images had been uploaded by partners, ex-partners or hackers and made available for download. These two high-profile cases helped to raise awareness of the non-consensual distribution of nude or sexual images, colloquially referred to as 'revenge pornography'.

'Revenge pornography' is a media-generated term widely understood to refer to the distribution of nude or sexual images by vengeful ex-lovers. While the term has been helpful in drawing attention to this issue, it is a misnomer because it fails to capture the diverse range of contexts in which this abuse occurs—for example, where the motivation is extortion, control, sexual gratification, voyeurism, increased social status or monetary gain. The term also focuses attention on the non-consensual distribution of images and overlooks other forms of abuse, such as the non-consensual creation of intimate images



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(eg 'upskirting', 'downblousing' or surreptitious filming in public or private places), or the threats of distribution. This paper uses the term 'image-based sexual abuse' (IBSA) (see McGlynn & Rackley 2017; McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton 2017; Powell, Henry & Flynn 2018), which includes three main behaviours:

- the non-consensual creation of nude or sexual images, including images that are digitally altered or manipulated to add a person's face to a pre-existing nude or sexual image;
- the non-consensual distribution of nude or sexual images; and
- threats to distribute nude or sexual images.

IBSA is a complex phenomenon. Perpetrators who non-consensually create, distribute or threaten to distribute nude or sexual images include intimate partners, family members, friends, acquaintances and persons unknown to the victim. Perpetrators who engage in these behaviours have diverse motivations, such as revenge, building their social status, sexual gratification, control, humiliation and monetary gain. The images may be created by the victim as a 'selfie' or produced consensually in the context of an intimate relationship. Alternatively, images may have been altered, taken surreptitiously, created coercively, or taken during a sexual assault or rape. While prior to the internet perpetrators used more conventional means of maliciously distributing intimate images (such as via street posters and letterboxes), IBSA represents a new and growing phenomenon that has significant long-term psychological, physical and social implications.

Over the past five years, there has been greater attention paid to IBSA globally, as evidenced by parliamentary inquiries, public consultations, criminal law reform, media attention, as well as other proposed or enacted legal and non-legal measures in various jurisdictions. However, there continue to be a number of barriers to responding to IBSA, including underreporting, inconsistent laws, a lack of resources, evidentiary limitations, jurisdictional restrictions, and victim-blaming attitudes that minimise and trivialise impacts and prevent victims from reporting to authorities. Likewise, there is a dearth of research that examines the nature, prevalence and impacts of IBSA in Australia and internationally.

This paper is drawn from a multi-methods study entitled *Responding to Revenge Pornography: The Scope, Nature and Impact of Australian Criminal Laws*, funded by a Criminology Research Grant (CRG08/15–16). The project examined the prevalence, nature and impacts of IBSA victimisation and perpetration in Australia, and analysed the effects of existing and proposed laws governing IBSA in Australia through a national survey and stakeholder interviews in three jurisdictions (South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales).

This paper reports specifically on the prevalence and impacts of IBSA victimisation and perpetration as self-reported in the national survey. The first part of the paper presents an overview of the quantitative research in this field, before outlining the aims and methodology of the study. The second part examines the victimisation and perpetration survey data and discusses the implications of these findings, including briefly outlining recommendations for policy and practice reform. For a more detailed discussion of the IBSA literature, the quantitative and qualitative findings of the *Responding to Revenge Pornography: The Scope, Nature and Impact of Australian Criminal Laws* study, and the policy recommendations arising from the project, please see [Henry, Flynn and Powell 2019](#).

Literature review: Quantitative research

Studies on 'sexting' among young people

The majority of quantitative research in the broader field of technology and intimate relationships has been on 'sexting' (the sending and/or receiving of nude or sexual images or text messages) among children and adolescents (see, for example, Crofts et al. 2015; Mitchell et al. 2012; Patrick et al. 2015; Stanley et al. 2018; Villacampa 2017). These sexting studies have yielded disparate findings on prevalence, depending on the participant sample, sampling techniques, instruments and definitions of sexting used. Establishing the prevalence of consensual sexting among young people is thus somewhat challenging (Klettke, Hallford & Mellor 2014; Lounsbury, Mitchell & Finkelhor 2011). However, these studies tend to concur that sexting is relatively common among young people (although see conflicting findings of a recent study by UK Safer Internet Centre, Netsafe, the University of Plymouth and the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (2017)).

While most of this research has focused on consensual sexting, some studies have also investigated the prevalence of 'non-consensual sexting' among children and adolescents, where images are taken or shared without consent. For example, Patrick, Heywood, Pitts and Mitchell (2015) found that 10 percent of school students had sent 'a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else'. Similarly, in a 2014 survey with undergraduate psychology students, 11 percent reported that a sext had been sent on without their consent while they were under the age of 18 (Strohmaier, Murphy & DeMatteo 2014). Crofts, Lee, McGovern and Milivojevic's (2015) study found a slightly lower rate, with six percent of respondents reporting sending an image to another person without consent (although in this study 20% of young people reported that they had shown another person an image without the depicted person's consent).

Other studies have explored 'coercive sexting', where a person is pressured or coerced into sending nude or sexual images (see, for example, Englander 2015; Mitchell et al. 2012). For instance, Drouin, Ross and Tobin (2015) found that one-fifth of American undergraduate students had been coerced into taking explicit images in the context of an intimate partner relationship. In another English study, Wood et al. (2015) found that over a quarter of the female participants who had sent a sexual image had been pressured by a partner to do so, and almost half had sent the image to prove their commitment. These studies did not, however, focus on IBSA behaviours beyond pressure or coercion to send a nude or sexual image.

To date, few empirical studies have explored non-consensual behaviours among adult populations. This is despite some research (Borrajo & Gámez-Guadix 2015) indicating that technology-based abuse between partners occurs more often between young adults than between adolescents or pre-adolescents. Of the studies that did examine prevalence among adult populations, the majority examined either consensual sexting among adults and/or a much broader range of abusive online behaviours (see, for example, Baumgartner, Valkenburg & Peter 2010; Gámez-Guadix et al. 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen & Voss 2012). This means that the majority of quantitative studies to date have not specifically focused on IBSA.

Victimisation studies

Few studies have examined the prevalence and impacts of IBSA victimisation. Most studies used small sample sizes and/or convenience samples (typically American college students). Nearly all of these studies were on intimate relationships and technology use or technology-facilitated abuse more broadly, and only three specifically on IBSA (Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 2014; Lenhart, Ybarra & Price-Feeney 2016; Office of the eSafety Commissioner (OeSC) 2017). Although it is difficult to compare results across studies because of the different methods, definitions and sample sizes used, the studies identified here indicate the prevalence of the non-consensual sharing of nude or sexual images among adults to be anywhere between one percent and 12 percent. 'Sharing' can include showing someone, distributing online or sending via mobile phone or other means. The review below reports on overall prevalence rates and any differences according to gender, age, sexuality and ethnicity.

Some studies found equal rates of IBSA victimisation for men and women, whereas others found that more men or more women reported being victimised. For instance, in their study of Spanish adults (n=873), Gámez-Guadix et al. (2015) found that one percent said that someone had disseminated or uploaded onto the internet photos or videos with erotic or sexual content of them without their consent, with fairly equal rates for men and women. In a nationally representative survey of US residents aged 15 years and over (n=3,002), Lenhart, Ybarra and Price-Feeney (2016) found that three percent of women and two percent of men said someone had posted a photo of them online without their permission. However, they found that young adults aged between 18 and 29 years were more likely than older adults to have had someone post an intimate image of them without their consent (5% for men and women alike). In this study, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) respondents (7%) were also more likely than heterosexuals (2%) to have experienced someone sharing a nude or nearly nude image of them without their consent.

Other studies have found higher prevalence rates. For instance, in an Australian study on technology-facilitated sexual violence, using a non-probability sample (n=2,956) of Australian men and women aged between 18 and 54 years, Powell and Henry (2017) found that 10 percent reported that a nude or semi-nude image of them had been distributed without their permission. They found that men (11%) were somewhat more likely to report experiencing this behaviour than women (7%), although notably the effect sizes for these differences were very low. Reed, Tolman and Ward (2016) also found that more men (6%) than women (3%) had had a sexually suggestive image of them shared without their permission (n=365).

In another Australian study specifically on IBSA conducted in 2017 by the authors and the Social Research Centre for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (n=4,122), 11 percent of respondents said they had had a nude or sexual photo or video posted online or sent on without their consent (OeSC 2017). In contrast to the other studies mentioned here, this study found that women over the age of 18 years were twice as likely as men over 18 (15% vs 7%) to have experienced someone sharing nude or sexual images of them without their consent. Like the Lenhart et al. study (mentioned above), this study found that age and gender were significant predictors of prevalence, with 24 percent of women and 16 percent of men aged between 18 and 24 years having experienced someone sharing a nude or sexual image of them without their consent. In addition to gender and age, this study found that

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to have experienced this form of IBSA (25% vs 11%). Finally, 19 percent of LGB participants said that someone had shared a nude or sexual image of them without their consent, compared to 11 percent of heterosexual participants. Prevalence was also high among those who speak a language other than English at home (19% vs 11%).

The studies yielded different findings depending on the questions participants were asked—whether a photograph and/or video had been shared, who the perpetrator was, and whether the image had been shared via the internet or by other means. The rates also varied depending on the sample. For instance, in three different non-representative studies, respondents were predominantly female (see Branch et al. 2017; Dir & Cyders 2015; Marganski & Melander 2018). However, what these studies collectively indicate is that IBSA is common among various populations, especially marginalised communities, including LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people, Indigenous Australians, women, young people and culturally and linguistically diverse people.

In addition to the findings on the non-consensual distribution of nude or sexual images, a small number of studies have more specifically focused on threats to share nude or sexual images, also known as ‘sextortion’. Although it did not measure prevalence, an in-depth study on sextortion was conducted by Thorn and the Crimes Against Children Research Center of the University of New Hampshire (Wolak & Finkelhor 2016). In their online survey of 18 to 25 year olds (n=1,631), they found:

Perpetrators carried out threats or otherwise harmed respondents in about 45% of cases, more frequently in the face-to-face relationship group than in the online encounter group, and disseminated sexual images in about 30% of cases. (Wolak & Finkelhor 2016: 5)

Such findings suggest that it is important to understand the relationship and overlap between threats to distribute nude or sexual images without consent and the non-consensual creation or distribution of such images.

As stated above, it is difficult to compare prevalence rates across different studies on sextortion behaviours, yet the findings suggest that anywhere between one percent and 15 percent of people have reported that someone has threatened to share intimate images of them. For instance, in an American study, two percent of women and the same proportion of men had experienced someone threatening to share embarrassing or sexually suggestive images, although it is worth noting that the sample size was small (n=365; Reed, Tolman & Ward 2016). In the Gámez-Guadix et al. (2015) study (n=873), the authors found that two percent said someone had threatened or coerced them into sending sexual images, and another two percent said they had been threatened or coerced into performing a sexual act on the internet. Lenhart, Ybarra and Price-Feeney (2016) also found comparatively low rates of sextortion victimisation across their representative sample (n=3,002), with four percent of women and two percent of men reporting that someone had threatened to post nude or nearly nude photos or videos of them to hurt or embarrass them. However, they found that young people aged between 15 and 29 were most likely to report being threatened with the sharing of nude or nearly nude images, with seven percent of participants under the age of 30 reporting this experience. They also found that young women under the age of 30 and LGB participants were more likely to have received such threats (10% and 15% respectively; Lenhart, Ybarra & Price-Feeney 2016).

Higher prevalence rates were reported in other studies. For instance, 10 percent of Australian respondents (n=2,956) in Powell and Henry's (2017) non-probability survey said that someone had threatened to distribute or share a nude or semi-nude image of them, with no significant differences reported by gender. The McAfee (2013) Love, Relationships and Technology Survey of American adults aged 18 to 54 (n=1,182) similarly found that one in 10 people said an ex-partner had threatened to post sexually explicit images of them online (with 60% having carried out the threat).

It is important that quantitative research not only establish the prevalence of IBSA behaviours but also measure the impacts on victims. Few studies to date have investigated these impacts because there have been very few studies investigating IBSA specifically. One exception is the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative's (2014) Effects of Revenge Porn Survey (n=1,606), which found that 49 percent of respondents had experienced online harassment or stalking by users who had seen the images, and 93 percent said they had experienced significant emotional distress as a result of their images being distributed online. In the representative Australian study mentioned above (n=4,122), the authors found that victims of the non-consensual sharing of nude or sexual images said they felt annoyed (65%), angry (64%), humiliated (55%), depressed (40%) and afraid for their safety (32%; OeSC 2017). Furthermore, 42 percent said their most recent experience of IBSA affected their self-esteem and 41 percent said it affected their mental health.

Perpetration and bystander studies

To date there has been little quantitative research investigating perpetration rates among either young people or adults, and no studies exclusively on IBSA, with the exception of the authors' study discussed above (OeSC 2017). While it is difficult to synthesise the findings given the different sample sizes, definitions and instruments used, studies indicate that between 12 percent and 30 percent of respondents report sharing nude or sexual images without the consent of the person depicted. In an Australian study by Crofts, Lee, McGovern and Milivojevic (2015) on 'sexting', they found that, among participants aged over 19 years (n=422), 16 percent had shown a sexual image to another person who was not meant to see it, four percent had shared the image online, and four percent had forwarded the image via mobile phone or email.

While Crofts et al. differentiated between various forms of sharing, in other studies it is unclear what 'sharing' means. For instance, in an Italian study on sexting and dating violence among 13 to 30 year olds (n=1,334), the authors found that 12.6 percent of respondents had shared a sexual image without another person's consent at least once (Morelli et al. 2016). In a study on 'technology-based coercion' (n=795), Thompson and Morrison (2013) found that 16.3 percent of men had shared a sexually suggestive message or picture of someone without their consent (n=795). Lastly, in a sexting study of American adults aged between 21 and 75 years (n=5,805), Garcia et al. (2016) found that more than one in five participants (23%) reported sharing a 'sexy' photo with someone else without consent. It is important to note that the Garcia et al. study focused on sharing photos, whereas the Thompson and Morrison study did not differentiate between sexual images (videos and/or photos) and text.

These existing studies did not report on gender, age, ethnicity or sexuality in relation to self-disclosed perpetration, with the exception of the Garcia et al. (2016) study, which found that more men (25%) than women (20%) had 'shared a received sexy photo with someone else'. Their study also found that gay men were twice as likely as lesbians to share such images.

There has also been limited investigation into bystanders and IBSA. A 2008 study of American young adults aged between 20 and 26 years (n=627) by Power to Decide (formerly the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy) found that 24 percent of women and 40 percent of men said that a nude or semi-nude image had been shared with them when intended for someone else. Another American study (n=3,447) found that 40 percent of men (compared with 24% of women) reported receiving second-hand 'sext content' (Gordon-Messer et al. 2013). Finally, a 2017 Australian national survey (OeSC 2017) found that almost one-fifth of Australian respondents (n=4,122) had received a nude or sexual image from someone else and either knew or suspected the person depicted had not consented to it being shared. The same study also found that few bystanders take action when they witness IBSA, with 44 percent of respondents saying they did not do or say anything in response to the behaviour.

Overall, these victimisation and perpetration studies used variable sample sizes, largely convenience populations (such as college student samples in America), and very few were exclusively focused on IBSA. Moreover, victimisation studies are likely to underestimate prevalence since they only include data from those victims who have become aware that images of them have been created and/or distributed without their consent. This is a limitation of survey-based research in this field.

Aim

The project Responding to Revenge Pornography: The Scope, Nature and Impact of Australian Criminal Laws sought to break new ground by gathering much-needed empirical data about the nature, prevalence and impacts of IBSA, as well as the effects of existing and proposed legislative reform in Australia. It addressed a significant gap in an under-researched area of criminal justice policy on an emerging issue of growing importance both nationally and internationally. Currently, it remains unclear whether the various approaches to criminalising or otherwise responding to IBSA in Australian jurisdictions have brought any benefits. The multi-jurisdictional study generated new knowledge, thus providing an evidence base on which future legal reform can draw. Significantly, this was the first-ever Australian study to empirically examine the extent of adult IBSA victimisation and perpetration.

The project addressed three key questions:

- What is the prevalence, nature and impact of IBSA in Australia?
- What are the merits and limitations of existing Australian and comparative legislative models for responding to IBSA?
- What are the perceptions of legal and policy stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of existing legislation and the need for new legislative models for responding to IBSA in Australia?

The project sought not only to inform law reform in Australia (and internationally), but also to guide a range of other legal and non-legal measures to both prevent and address IBSA.

Method

The study involved a three-phase qualitative and quantitative methodology.

Phase 1 involved stakeholder engagement, which comprised two components. First, a National 'Revenge Pornography' Law Reform Roundtable was held in February 2016 with invited law reform experts from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, followed by workshop discussions with a stakeholder audience. The second component included semi-structured interviews with participants from the following stakeholders: law enforcement, domestic violence and sexual assault service providers, legal and policy experts, academics, youth sector representatives, LGBTI representatives, technology industry members, and the disability sector. In total, 44 interviews were conducted with 52 participants in Victoria (n=30), New South Wales (n=12) and South Australia (n=10) between April 2016 and October 2017. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, verified and de-identified. The interview transcripts were then coded using NVivo software for qualitative data analysis according to 16 key themes.

Phase 2 involved an in-depth analysis of laws in the three Australian case study states (New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria), as well as four international jurisdictions: Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. This analysis was further nuanced in the Australian states through consideration of the uptake and reach of applicable offences based on analysis of reported crime statistics.

Phase 3 involved conducting a national survey to examine the extent and impacts of adult experiences of IBSA victimisation and perpetration, with respondents broadly representing the Australian population across key demographics. This phase of the methodology is the focus of this paper.

The study sample consisted of 4,274 adult respondents (56% women and 44% men) recruited via Research Now, an online panel provider. This was a non-probability sample with controls to reduce bias and better approximate the population. Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 49 (mean=34.54 years, SD=8.96). This age range represents both the adults at highest risk of sexual and family violence (ABS 2012), and the majority of mobile phone and internet users (ACMA 2011). Overall, 88 percent of respondents identified as heterosexual and 12 percent identified as LGB. Of those identifying as LGB, 48 percent identified as female and 52 percent as male. All respondents were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine attitudes to and experiences of sex, technology and relationships.

The survey included questions about IBSA, as well as general technology use, online dating, sexual selfie-taking and demographic items. For further details about the survey, see [Henry, Flynn and Powell 2019](#).

Results

Digital dating and sexual self-imagery

After some general questions about technology use and social media participation, respondents were asked about their own digital dating and sexual self-image ('selfie') behaviours. Overall, the data suggest that digital dating behaviours, such as using websites, hook-up apps, texting or messaging to flirt, arrange dates, or to meet for sex, were the norm for respondents. In total, 74 percent had engaged in at least one digital dating behaviour.

Sharing a nude or sexual self-image was also relatively common among the sample, with almost half of respondents reporting that they had done so (see Table 1). Most online dating and sexual self-image taking behaviours were more commonly engaged in by men than by women. For example, men (50%) were more likely than women (42%) to have ever voluntarily sent another person a sexual self-image. Men were also more likely than women to have sent a sexual self-image to someone they only knew online (37% of men compared with 21% of women), or to someone they had just met (31% of men compared with 17% of women). Men (27%) were also more likely than women (18%) to say that they had sent a sexual self-image when they did not really want to. However, two specific items asking about feeling pressured to send a sexual selfie, and receiving an image of someone's genitals that they had not requested, did not differ significantly by gender.

Table 1: Digital dating and sexual self-image behaviours, by gender

	Females n (%)	Males n (%)	Total n (%)
Any digital dating behaviours	1,713 (71.2)	1,458 (78.1)***	3,171 (74.2)
Any voluntary sexual self-image behaviours	1,021 (42.4)	927 (49.6)***	1,948 (45.6)
Any pressured/unwanted sexual self-image behaviours	654 (27.2)	578 (30.9)	1,232 (28.8)
Any image-based harassing behaviours	860 (35.7)	804 (43.0)***	1,664 (38.9)

*** statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

In comparing the four categories of digital dating and sexual selfie behaviours by age, a clear pattern emerges (see Table 2). Overall, 20 to 29 year olds are most likely to engage in both digital dating behaviours and voluntary sexual self-image behaviours, while those aged 40 to 49 are least likely to do so. There were no statistically significant differences in these categories for those aged 16 to 19, and 30 to 39. However, for pressured and unwanted sexual self-image behaviours, as well as image-based harassing behaviours, there was a trend towards younger people aged 16 to 19, and those aged 20 to 29, being more likely to experience these behaviours.

Table 2: Any digital dating and sexual self-image behaviours, by age

Behaviour	Age group (years)			
	a: 16–19 n (%)	b: 20–29 n (%)	c: 30–39 n (%)	d: 40–49 n (%)
Digital dating	191 (76.7) ^{b,d}	965 (85.0) ^{a,c,d}	1122 (77.3) ^{b,d}	893 (62.1) ^{a,b,c}
Voluntary sexual self-image	108 (43.4) ^{b,d}	647 (57.0) ^{a,c,d}	705 (48.6) ^{b,d}	488 (33.9) ^{a,b,c}
Pressured/unwanted sexual self-image	101 (40.6) ^{c,d}	444 (39.1) ^{c,d}	458 (31.6) ^{a,b,d}	229 (15.9) ^{a,b,c}
Image-based harassing	129 (51.8) ^{c,d}	556 (49.0) ^{c,d}	598 (41.2) ^{a,b,d}	381 (26.5) ^{a,b,c}

Note: Letters a, b, c, d denote statistically significant differences between age categories (horizontal cells), $p < 0.001$

Victimisation of image-based sexual abuse

In the survey, one in five respondents (23%) reported being a victim of at least one form of IBSA. This includes the creation, distribution or threatened distribution of photos or videos where a person was nude, where their breasts or genitals were visible, where they were engaged in a sex act, where they were showering or bathing, and ‘upskirting’ and ‘downblousing’ images. The most common forms of victimisation were nude or sexual images being taken of them without their consent, with one in five (20%) reporting these experiences. Also common was nude or sexual images being distributed without consent, with one in 10 (11%) reporting these experiences. This is likely to be an underestimate, since many victims will never discover that images of them have been either created or distributed.

The study also found a large crossover between the non-consensual creation and distribution of images. Of those who had experienced a nude or sexual image of them being taken without their consent, 45 percent said an image of them had also been distributed without their consent.

The most common methods by which victims reported their images had been distributed included: mobile phone messaging, email, Snapchat, Facebook, and other online sites (such as Reddit, Tumblr and blogging sites), with 40 percent of victims saying their images had been distributed across multiple devices and platforms. The finding that interpersonal communications methods such as mobile phones, email and social media were most commonly used is an important one but it also has a clear limitation. As the survey only captured experiences where victims had become aware that their images had been distributed, interpersonal communication platforms and devices are likely to be represented as a highly common mode, because distribution on these platforms is most likely to come to the victims’ attention. Interestingly, very few respondents said that their images had been shared on ‘revenge pornography’, ‘ex-girlfriend’ or similar websites, yet it is possible that if those sites had been used victims would not know that their images were circulating there.

Nine percent of respondents had experienced threats of a nude or sexual image being distributed without their consent (see Table 3). Though threats were the least common form of IBSA in the study, these experiences are particularly harmful for victims ([Henry, Flynn & Powell 2019](#); Powell, Henry & Flynn 2018).

Overall, the study found that women and men reported similar rates of victimisation (see Table 3); however, the findings demonstrate different gendered patterns in the nature of IBSA and its effects, as well as self-disclosed perpetration.

	Females n=2,406 (%)	Males n=1,868 (%)	Total n=4,274 (%)
Sexual/nude images created without consent	462 (19.2)	402 (21.5)	864 (20.2)
Sexual/nude images distributed without consent	221 (9.2)	233 (12.5)	454 (10.6)
Threatened with distribution of sexual/nude images without consent	170 (7.1)	198 (10.6)	368 (8.6)
Any IBSA victimisation	524 (21.8)	445 (23.8)	969 (22.7)

Female respondents were also asked about upskirting and downblousing—where images of their cleavage or up their skirt had been taken, distributed or threatened to be distributed, without their permission. One in 10 women said that someone had taken an image of their cleavage without their permission and one in 20 said someone had taken an image up their skirt without their permission (data not shown). Again, it is important to remember that these are only the prevalence rates of victims becoming aware that someone had taken these images without their consent. The data presented in this analysis is therefore likely to be an underestimate of the actual rate of victimisation.

Victimisation in vulnerable populations

Some groups within the Australian community were significantly more likely than others to report ever being a victim of IBSA. For example, 50 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and 56 percent of respondents disclosing a disability reported ever experiencing at least one form of IBSA. One in three LGB respondents (36%) had experienced IBSA victimisation, compared with one in five (21%) identifying as heterosexual. Meanwhile, IBSA victimisation was higher among those aged 16 to 19 years (31%), and 20 to 29 years (27%).

	Age group (years)			
	a: 16–19 n (%)	b: 20–29 n (%)	c: 30–39 n (%)	d: 40–49 n (%)
Sexual/nude images taken without consent	66 (26.5) ^{c,d}	264 (23.3) ^{c,d}	296 (20.4) ^{a,b,d}	238 (16.5) ^{a,b,c}
Sexual/nude images distributed without consent	33 (13.3)	159 (14.0)	185 (12.7)	77 (5.4) ^{a,b,c}
Threatened with distribution of sexual/nude images without consent	28 (11.2)	143 (12.6)	152 (10.5)	45 (3.1) ^{a,b,c}
Any IBSA victimisation	77 (30.9) ^{c,d}	306 (27.0) ^{c,d}	325 (22.4) ^{a,b,d}	261 (18.1) ^{a,b,c}

Note: Letters a, b, c, d denote statistically significant differences between age categories (horizontal cells), $p < 0.001$

Of those who responded 'yes' to either 'always' or 'sometimes' needing assistance with their daily living activities, body movement activities and/or communication needs, more than half reported experiencing at least one form of IBSA (56%). This rate was significantly higher than that of respondents who did not disclose needing such assistance (18%). Of the different forms of IBSA, 53 percent of respondents with a disability reported that someone had taken a nude or sexual image without their permission, 42 percent reported that such an image had been distributed, and 41 percent said that they had experienced threats relating to the distribution of nude or sexual images.

Those who identified as having Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent were twice as likely to be victimised (50%) as non-Indigenous respondents (22%). Victimization most commonly involved the creation of nude or sexual images without permission, with 47 percent of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people experiencing this abuse, compared with 19 percent of non-Indigenous Australians. Thirty-seven percent of Indigenous respondents reported a nude or sexual image of them had been distributed without consent, compared with nine percent of non-Indigenous Australians, while 36 percent had been threatened with the distribution of a nude or sexual image, compared with eight percent of non-Indigenous Australians.

LGB respondents were also significantly more likely (36%) than heterosexual respondents (21%) to report experiencing IBSA. Gay and bisexual males were slightly more likely (39%) than lesbians and bisexual females (33%) to report being victims. Gay and bisexual males were also the most likely of any group to report consensually taking and sending sexual self-images, with 79 percent reporting doing so, compared with 64 percent of lesbians and gay females, 48 percent of heterosexual males, and 41 percent of heterosexual females. Consistent with broader patterns, nude or sexual images being taken without consent was the most common form of IBSA for LGB respondents, with 33 percent reporting experience of this abuse, compared with 19 percent of heterosexual respondents. Of LGB respondents, 21 percent reported at least one experience of the non-consensual distribution of a nude or sexual image, compared with nine percent of those identifying as heterosexual. Finally, 18 percent reported experiencing threats of distribution, compared with seven percent of heterosexual respondents.

The study did not find any significant association between victimisation and language spoken at home, whether a respondent was Australian-born or foreign-born, level of education, or income. (For a complete table of victimisation by demographic variables, see [Henry, Flynn & Powell 2019](#)).

A further noteworthy pattern reflected in the victimisation rates are differences according to sexual self-image taking behaviours. The survey found that those who disclosed engaging in voluntary sexual selfie-taking behaviours were significantly more likely (37%) than those who had never sent a sexual selfie (10%) to have experienced at least one form of IBSA. Also, those who had been pressured into sharing a sexual selfie were more likely (46%) to be victimised than those who did not report this experience (13%). However, even among those who said they had never consensually sent, or been pressured to send, a sexual self-image, one in 10 was still a victim of IBSA. This can be understood in light of the finding that many victims have experienced someone creating a nude or sexual photo or video of them without their permission. In other words, while sending sexual selfies might increase the risk that those images are misused, not sending sexual selfies is by no means a guaranteed protection against victimisation.

Perpetration of image-based sexual abuse

The majority (54%) of victims of IBSA reported that the perpetrator was male, with victims reporting 33 percent of perpetrators were female, and 13 percent were either unknown or a group of both male and female perpetrators. These patterns differed only slightly by the gender of the victim, with females (57%) slightly more likely than males (50%) to be victimised by a male perpetrator, and females (30%) slightly less likely than males (35%) to be victimised by a female perpetrator. What these findings suggest is that IBSA, while gendered in some ways, is not a gender-specific form of abuse and harassment.

Overall, one in 10 respondents disclosed that they had themselves engaged in at least one IBSA behaviour (see Table 5). Almost nine percent said that they had taken a nude or sexual image of another person without that person's permission, while 6.7 percent said that they had distributed a nude or sexual image without permission. Finally, one in 20 (5%) said that they had made threats to distribute nude or sexual images of another person without permission.

	Females n=2,406 (%)	Males n=1,868 (%)	Total n=4,274 (%)
Created sexual/nude images without consent	153 (6.5)	220 (12.2)***	373 (8.9)
Distributed sexual/nude images without consent	109 (4.6)	168 (9.3)***	227 (6.7)
Threatened to distribute sexual/nude images without consent	80 (3.4)	129 (7.2)***	209 (5.0)
Any IBSA perpetration	171 (7.4)	240 (13.7)***	411 (10.1)

*** statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

For all individual IBSA behaviours, men were significantly more likely to report perpetration than women. Overall, 13.7 percent of men and 7.4 percent of women reported engaging in any IBSA perpetration. Perpetration was highest for men in the 20 to 29 (18%) and 30 to 39 (16%) age groups. For women, perpetration was highest among those aged 20 to 29 (9%) and 16 to 19 (9%), suggesting a younger cohort of women engaging in IBSA perpetration compared with men (see Table 6).

	Age group (years)			
	a: 16–19 n (%)	b: 20–29 n (%)	c: 30–39 n (%)	d: 40–49 n (%)
Created sexual/nude images without consent	21 (9.3)	122 (11.0)	150 (10.6)	80 (5.6) _{a,b,c}
Distributed sexual/nude images without consent	14 (6.3)	110 (9.9)	116 (8.2)	37 (2.6) _{a,b,c}
Threatened to distribute sexual/nude images without consent	11 (4.9)	87 (7.9)	95 (6.7)	16 (1.1) _{a,b,c}
Any IBSA perpetration	23 (10.5)	133 (12.2)	163 (11.8)	92 (6.7) _{a,b,c}

Note: Letters a, b, c, d denote statistically significant differences between age categories (horizontal cells), $p < 0.001$

The survey also asked perpetrators about characteristics of their behaviours. Most perpetrators said the victim was a partner or former partner, a family member or a friend. Perpetrators who distributed images without consent were similarly likely to say the image was of a male victim (35%) as a female victim (37%), which reflects the patterns in the broader victimisation data (see Powell, Henry, Flynn & Scott 2018).

Community attitudes towards image-based sexual abuse

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they agreed with statements which minimised the harm of IBSA, blamed victims, or made excuses for perpetration. Overall, men (49%) were significantly more likely than women (32%) to hold attitudes that minimised the harms, blamed the victims, or excused the perpetrators of IBSA. Given that men were also more likely to report having perpetrated IBSA, this suggests a need for community education in Australia on the seriousness of IBSA and perpetrator responsibility for it.

A particularly pertinent finding was that four in five (81%) Australians surveyed agreed with the statement: 'It should be a crime for someone to share a nude or sexual image of another person without that person's permission'. Females (84%) were significantly ($p < 0.001$) more likely than males (77%) to endorse the criminalisation of IBSA. Victims (81%) and non-victims (81%) of IBSA were equally likely to agree that it should be a crime. Perpetrators (77%) were somewhat less likely to agree that IBSA should be a crime than non-perpetrators (81%), although the difference was not statistically significant. These findings indicate that there is broad support within the Australian community for legal consequences in response to IBSA, regardless of whether someone has experienced it personally as either a victim or perpetrator.

Implications and conclusion

These findings shed much-needed light on the diversity and complexity of IBSA behaviours. The study found these harms to be relatively common, affecting one in five of those surveyed. Moreover, the study found that one in 10 of those surveyed had experienced the non-consensual distribution of a nude or sexual image—a finding which has since been replicated in a national population-based survey of Australians (OeSC 2017). While a substantial portion of IBSA mirrors the dynamics of male-to-female partner abuse, this is far from being a gendered issue, with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups most likely to be victimised, and common dynamics of peer-to-peer sexual harassment and abuse also being found to exist. This finding suggests that additional research into the qualitative differences in the nature and impacts of different forms of IBSA is required to further understand how the experiences of victimisation and perpetration may differ for different groups. Importantly, the study found this issue affects young adults (20 to 29 years) at similar rates as younger people (16 to 19 years), although younger people may be more vulnerable to the impacts of victimisation, and remain an important group to work with on prevention.

Despite the advances represented by the present study, there are some limitations that should be mentioned to help guide future research efforts. First, this study involved a non-generalisable community sample recruited via an online panel. While online panel providers make efforts to recruit a diverse population, some research suggests that online panel samples may under-represent some subgroups compared with others (Baker et al. 2010). Future research should thus seek to validate these findings among a more representative sample of the general population and further examine the experiences of different subpopulation groups.

The findings reported here suggest wider implications for research, policy and practice. In particular, the present study recommends strengthening legal options, both civil and criminal, to address IBSA harms. This would include the introduction of consistent criminal offences across all Australian states and territories, and strengthening civil law options for victims who wish to sue in civil courts by strengthening privacy laws and making civil action affordable for ordinary Australians. The study also recommends the introduction of legislation that empowers courts and/or independent government agencies to compel individuals to take all reasonable steps to remove, delete or destroy non-consensual nude or sexual images, with further criminal or civil penalties for noncompliance.

Further, there should be a review of the regulatory frameworks that impose legal obligations on internet service providers, search engine operators and social media companies to screen content, have clear takedown (removal) policies, and take responsibility for removing images within reasonable time frames. The introduction of an image-based abuse reporting portal on the eSafety Commissioner's website in October 2017, and the introduction of a federal civil penalty scheme in August 2018, are examples of positive steps taken collaboratively between government and industry to respond to this social harm.

Additional funding should also be provided to establish and strengthen victim support services, including telephone, in-person and online information and support, with a focus on making these support avenues accessible and relevant to the diverse range of victims who experience IBSA harms, including young people, people with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and members of the LGBTI community. This includes increasing training and resources for those tasked with investigating and responding to IBSA. Furthermore, it is vital that accessible and easily comprehensible advice is made available online to bystanders who receive nude or sexual images regarding content removal and other actions to take. Such measures should take place in conjunction with primary prevention campaigns that focus on consent and respectful relationships, raise awareness of the problem of IBSA, and promote proactive bystander interventions to challenge problematic behaviours and attitudes. In sum, a multifaceted approach is necessary to both respond to and prevent IBSA.

The present study is the first Australian empirical research to shed light on the self-disclosed perpetration of IBSA. However, further qualitative research into the nature and dynamics of IBSA perpetration, as well as peer support and the role of witnesses and bystanders represents an important direction for future research. It is hoped that the findings presented here will improve understanding of IBSA victimisation and perpetration in Australia, and contribute to creative ways of addressing and preventing this form of abuse.

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