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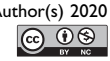
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'It's Torture for the Soul': The Harms of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Beyond 'scandals' and the public testimonies of victim-survivors, surprisingly little is known about the nature and extent of the harms of 'image-based sexual abuse', a term that includes all non-consensual taking and/or sharing of nude or sexual images. Accordingly, this article examines the findings from the first cross-national qualitative study on this issue, drawing on interviews with 75 victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. We adopt a feminist phenomenological approach that permits more nuanced and holistic understandings of victim-survivors' experiences, moving beyond medicalised, trauma-based accounts of harm. Our analysis develops five interconnected accounts of the harms experienced, that we have termed social rupture, constancy, existential threat, isolation and constrained liberty. Our

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findings shed new light on the nature and significance of the harms of image-based sexual abuse that emphasises the need for more comprehensive and effective responses to these abuses.

Keywords
feminist phenomenology, image-based sexual abuse, non-consensual porn, social rupture, 'revenge porn'

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of new criminal laws and high-level policy initiatives across the world aimed at addressing the non-consensual creation, distribution and/or threats to distribute nude or sexual images; what we term 'image-based sexual abuse' (Flynn and Henry, 2019; Franks, 2017; Haynes, 2018; McGlynn and Rackley, 2017). Indeed, reports on image-based sexual abuse are rarely out of the news. Yet such attention has largely been driven by scandals – exceptional events, often high-profile cases, sometimes involving celebrities and frequently causing significant harms. While these exceptional events have served to highlight image-based sexual abuse as a serious issue, scandals can lie, silence, distort and prevaricate. Scandals, as Gavey (2019: 236) argues, 'deceive': 'They allow us to fixate on what we can pretend is a terrible aberration . . . while the more systemic problems in the everyday workings of culture and society (from which scandals erupt) remain invisible to us'. Scandals suggest we know more than we do and – crucially – that we are doing more than we are.

Beyond the scandals, we know relatively little about the reality of image-based sexual abuse, particularly the harms which are less visible, consequential, or which do not fit the paradigmatic 'revenge' narrative so commonly told in media and other public discourses. Despite the ostensible outrage and condemnation of image-based sexual abuse, many victim-survivors continue to experience a lack of understanding from others about the nature and extent of the harms experienced. This not only limits efforts to prevent and respond to image-based sexual abuse, but – as with other forms of sexual violence and abuse – creates space for ambivalence: for professed outrage, action and recognition on the one hand, yet on the other hand, framings and outcomes that serve to minimise, blame, disregard, misrepresent or justify harm (see further Gavey, 2019).

Although quantitative research has begun to investigate the pervasiveness of image-based sexual abuse (see e.g. Powell and Henry, 2019; Powell et al., 2019; Ruvalcaba and Eaton, 2020), few studies to date have empirically examined the experiences of victim-survivors. Those studies that have focused on the harms of image-based sexual abuse have been with small participant numbers and/or concentrated on one specific form of such abuse (e.g. Bates, 2017).

This article seeks to address this knowledge gap. It reports on the first, cross-national qualitative study of the experiences of victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse living in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In drawing on data from 75

interviews with victim-survivors of all forms of image-based sexual abuse, it presents analysis from the largest qualitiative study in this field to date. It begins by examining the current frameworks through which the harms of image-based sexual abuse are commonly explained, and suggests moving beyond medicalised trauma-focused accounts of harms. We argue that a feminist phenomonological framework is needed to better understand the nature of the impacts and harms of image-based sexual abuse. We develop this analysis through examining five interconnected themes that emerged from our interviews and that we have termed: social rupture, constancy, existential threat, isolation and constrained liberty.

Our findings shed new light on the nature and significance of the harms of image-based sexual abuse which we hope will improve understandings of this abuse. We hope that victim-survivors will be empowered to better articulate and comprehend their experiences and that those responding might better understand the holistic and comprehensive nature of the harms of image-based sexual abuse. This, in turn, should help to shift law and policy debates towards more comprehensive and effective responses.

Framing the Harms of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

The terminology 'image-based sexual abuse' is used here to include all forms of the non-consensual creating or sharing of nude or sexual images (or videos), including threats to share images and altered images (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017; Powell and Henry, 2017). Such acts are wrongs, regardless of the nature and extent of any further consequential harm, as they constitute breaches of an individual's 'fundamental rights to dignity and privacy, as well as their freedom of sexual expression and autonomy' (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017: 546; see also Citron and Franks, 2014). Beyond this wrong per se, there can often be serious, harmful consequences for victim-survivors.

It may be helpful therefore to distinguish between the wrong (in this case, the non-consensual creation and/or disclosure of nude or private sexual images, including threats to share) and the harm caused (that is, the *consequences* of the wrong). This is not to suggest that both elements are – or should be – required in order for there to be a criminal wrong. Indeed, such an approach would not only fail to recognise the inherent wrong of the act/s, but it also risks expecting particular responses from victim-survivors (see Gavey and Farley, 2020). Rather, it is to suggest that our understanding of, and in turn our responses to, image-based sexual abuse may be improved once we distinguish the wrongful act from the harm it causes.

Put another way, there is a need to recognise that *all* forms of image-based sexual abuse involve some form of *prima facie* wrong, even though the nature and impacts of that wrong may be experienced differently across different groups. Particularly, it is vital to recognise that any harms experienced will vary in terms of their nature and consequences across, and at the intersection of, genders, ethnicities, sexualities, age, class and other social, political and cultural positions. We should not expect the experience and consequential harms of image-based sexual abuse to be uniform. This, in turn, may require different supports and responses for victim-survivors.

In the following section, we explore two overarching frameworks to explore the consequential harms of image-based sexual abuse, namely medicalised trauma-based and phenomenological approaches. While medicalised trauma-based approaches have been fundamental to highlighting some of the ways in which image-based sexual abuse generates harms, we reflect on their limitations, before moving on to consider the opportunities offered by feminist phenomenological approaches to sexual violence. Our aim is to build on these foundations in order to generate a more holistic framework for understanding the harms of image-based sexual abuse which, in turn, can help produce more effective legal and policy responses.

Medicalised Trauma-Based Understandings of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Evidence of the serious and wide-ranging nature of the harms of image-based sexual abuse has come into the public domain via victim-survivor testimonies (Evans, 2016), academic analyses of the significance of these testimonies (Bloom, 2014; Citron and Franks, 2014; Kamal and Newman, 2016), qualitative studies (Bates, 2017) and quantitative research (Powell and Henry, 2019; Ruvalcaba and Eaton, 2020). Collectively, these works suggest: first, that the harms of image-based sexual abuse are not trivial; second, that in some contexts the severity of consequences for victim-survivors is akin to other forms of sexual violence; and third, that improved legislative, policy, educational and therapeutic responses are necessary to address the harms. Indeed, several of these studies have played a crucial role in securing legislative and policy changes.

While this research has played a vital role in elaborating the harms of image-based sexual abuse, it has primarily conceptualised the harms through a medicalised trauma-based framework which draws upon biomedical discourses of trauma – describing, for example, discrete forms of psychological (and physical) injury or distress (see e.g. Bates, 2017; Kamal and Newman, 2016; Ruvalcaba and Eaton, 2020). For instance, Bates' (2017) study of 18 US and Canadian survivors of 'revenge pornography' (referring to the non-consensual *distribution* of a nude or sexual image) can have serious 'mental health effects', including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidality, anxiety, depression, as well as negative psychological impacts such as lack of trust, loss of control, and potentially harmful coping mechanisms, such as high alcohol use.

Foregrounding such psychological or mental health effects of abuse emphasises a medicalised trauma framework for conceptualising the nature of the relationship between violence and consequential suffering. Research documenting the harms of image-based sexual abuse through a trauma lens can help to legitimise victim-survivors' experiences as 'real', conveying the extent of their violation and validating the harm and suffering that many experience (Wasco, 2003). For some, it might provide a framework that helps to make sense of their experiences. More instrumentally, insofar as medicalised trauma models lend themselves to quantifiable, clinical measurements of harm – for instance, by providing 'authoritative evidence' of the severe and widespread effects of sexual violence in society (Morrison et al., 2004: 4) – they serve a practical function, informing developments in policy and practice and helping to justify the allocation of resources for prevention and support (DiTullio and Sullivan, 2019; Gilfus, 1999; Root, 1992; Wasco, 2003).

However, despite these merits, there are at least two broad concerns with using a medicalised trauma framework as the primary lens for recognising the harms of image-based sexual abuse. Firstly, when trauma is operationalised as discrete mental health effects or forms of psychological distress, harms become categorised and defined in narrow ways that do not adequately capture the wide array of complex and interconnected ways that image-based sexual abuse impacts on victim-survivors. As such, the nature of harm experienced by many victim-survivors risks being missed, minimised and misunderstood within a medical trauma model. This can include devastating psychological impacts that do not correspond with clinically defined traumatic 'symptoms' or circumscribed categories of mental health effects (Gavey, 2007), as well as a range of other practical, personal and social harms that nonetheless can have serious, often ongoing and cumulative impacts and consequences.

Paradoxically, therefore, while the medicalised trauma model has been vital in explaining the harm of experiences such as sexual violence, as it has gained legitimacy, it has often come to operate as an ethnocentric, 'one size fits all' conceptual framework. Where a victim-survivor's complex and lived experience sits outside the paradigmatic medicalised narrative of trauma, they are not only left without the language with which to articulate their experiences, but they are also likely to receive less practical support and assistance, and potentially suffer further harm due to not having their experience adequately validated and recognised by others (Gavey and Schmidt, 2011; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2011). Within this model (although it is not inherent to this approach), support can become reduced to medicalised forms of individual treatment. At worst, through an authoritative, implicitly prescriptive stance on *the* nature of the traumatic effects of sexual violence, it can bring 'its own ways of othering, stigmatising, violating, and potentially obstructing avenues of support and understanding' (Gavey and Schmidt, 2011: 451).

The second broad limitation of medicalised trauma conceptions is that they can end up inadvertently colluding with the gendered status quo to decontextualise and depoliticise the harms of sexual violence (even though this is anathema to earlier feminist landmark trauma formulations – see e.g. Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974, Herman, 1992, and Vera-Gray, 2020 for an excellent summary). While it is well-established that sexual violence occurs in particular intersectional, gendered and socio-political contexts, all of which may co-produce, shape and extend the harms experienced, a reductive focus on the discrete mental health effects or psychological distress an individual victim-survivor suffers, tends to lock our attention on that individual. This can orientate our focus towards a 'pathologised subject', wherein harms are framed as medical 'symptoms' or signs of individual distress and dysfunction which are disconnected from broader contexts of misogyny, racism and other forms of oppression in which sexual violence is experienced (see e.g. Burstow, 2003; Gavey, 2007; Gilfus, 1999; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2011; Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018; Wasco, 2003).

This underscores the value of Kelly's (1988) formative work in which she re-orientates the many different, often discretely-conceived, forms of sexual violence experienced by women as existing on a non-hierarchical, interconnected continuum, underpinned by patriarchy, male violence and misogyny. This 'continuum-thinking' (Boyle, 2018) is particularly important in the context of image-based sexual abuse in

which, as we explain below, many victim-survivors' experiences of these harms are not disconnected from other forms of harassment, violation and abuse (McGlynn et al., 2017). In focusing on individual mental health effects and medical trauma discourse, we risk diverting attention away from social injustice as a source of harm, obscuring the potential of harm prevention strategies which might be secured through social change (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018: 81).

Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Accordingly, more holistic, synergistic conceptual frameworks are needed to articulate the harms of sexual violence in ways which extend beyond the confines of medicalised typologies and 'trauma talk' (Marecek, 1999). In this context, feminist phenomenological works have conceptualised suffering as an embodied, conscious and subjective happening, experienced and situated in a particular time and place (Butler, 1989; de Beauvoir, 2012; Scarry, 1985; Young, 1990).[1] Thus, phenomenological perspectives can introduce into view the holistic experiences of an embodied, subjective self who is mutually constituted through meaningful relations with others, and the temporally, spatially and historically specific world in which they are situated (Brison, 2003; Du Toit, 2009; Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018). Within this framework common experiential dimensions relating to the harms of sexual violence can be identified and conceptualised holistically, interwoven into the social fabric of victim-survivors' lifeworlds. For example, drawing upon aspects of experience shared across different subjectivities, sexual violence is often phenomenologically characterised as a fundamental disruption of one's 'being-in-the-world' (Brison, 2003; Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018). Moreover, feminist phenomenological works centre everyday experience within an analysis of how this is inflected by our situatedness: 'opening up a theoretical space to talk about the realities of sexual violence as a constraining context for women without denying their "space for action"' (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018: 92). In addition, by locating sexual violence as taking place within a particular socio-symbolic context, phenomenology permits the analysis and theorisation of harm, without resorting to essentialist discourse (see e.g. Alcoff, 2018; Conaghan, 2019; Du Toit, 2009).

While phenomenological approaches have been applied to understanding the impacts of rape (see e.g. Brison, 2003; Cahill, 2008; Du Toit, 2009), and the harms of more 'everyday' intrusions such as street-based harassment (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018), they have not yet been developed in the context of image-based sexual abuse, or technology-facilitated sexual violence more broadly. They offer considerable promise in this area, given the theoretical challenges posed by this form of sexual violence, where embodied experience intersects physical and digital realities, as well as individuals' 'online' and 'offline' worlds (Henry and Powell, 2015). Further, a phenomenological perspective can take account of the fact that victim-survivors may talk in terms of commonly understood ideas of trauma, while not confining or limiting those harms and experiences to medicalised understandings. Some victim-survivors in the present study, for example, described symptoms and diagnoses of PTSD and many experienced mental health and psychological trauma-related harms which must be appropriately recognised and treated.

Our argument, therefore, is that a feminist phenomenological perspective provides an approach that better captures the totality, extent and diversity of the harms experienced. It can help us to recognise that image-based sexual abuse, and its harms, remain relatively fluid concepts, embedded within contingent 'networks of values, attitudes and relations which are, inter alia, gendered' (Conaghan, 2019: 30). A holistic understanding is, in turn, fundamental to ensuring appropriate and effective law and policy responses.

The Current Study

This article draws upon the data from 75 interviews with victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse conducted across the UK, Australia and New Zealand. These interviews were part of a 3-year, cross-jurisdictional project funded by the Australian Research Council examining the pervasiveness, nature and impacts of image-based sexual abuse by means of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews in the UK, Australia and New Zealand.[2] Interview participants were required to be 18 years of age or older; live in either Australia, New Zealand, or the UK; and have experienced one or more of the following: another person having created and/or distributed a nude or sexual image of them without their consent and/or another person having made threats to distribute a nude or sexual image of them without their consent. Ethics approval was granted by RMIT University.

Participants were recruited using a variety of methods. Some participants were recruited through paid Facebook advertising which purposefully attempted to recruit participants across a range of genders, ages, economic statuses, culturally diverse groups and geographic locations in Australia, New Zealand and the UK (see e.g. Ramo et al., 2014). Others were recruited through private Facebook groups and Twitter. We also combined social media advertising with more traditional methods of recruitment, including snowball sampling to reach informal networks of victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse, as well as the electronic and hard-copy distribution of advertisements. A small number of participants were recruited through victim-support organisations and networks.

In total, 75 participants were recruited for interviews in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, with 25 from each country. The majority of participants were younger adults: 68% (n = 51) were aged 18–29 years, followed by 20% (n = 15) aged 30–39 and 12% (n = 9) over 40. Participants also predominantly identified as women (89%, n = 67), compared to men (8%, n = 6), trans (1%, n = 1) and self-identified 'other' (1%, n = 1). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual/straight (63%, n = 47), followed by bisexual (19%, n = 14), lesbian (3%, n = 2), gay (3%, n = 2), queer (3%, n = 2), 'other' (8%, n = 6) and 'unsure' (3%, n = 2). In terms of ethnicity, 81% (n = 61) identified as either 'white' (Australia and the UK) or New Zealand European (New Zealand), with 19% (n = 14) identifing across a range of different ethnicities, including New Zealand Māori (3%, n = 2) and Black British (1%, n = 1). Finally, 25% (n = 19) of our participants identified as having a disability.

Specificities and Limitations

This research draws on a substantial qualitative dataset. However, it is important to note the specificities and limitations of the pool of interviewees. We were not able to recruit evenly across demographic categories when compared to broader population demographics, such as age and gender. Nonetheless, in relation to age, that the majority of participants were younger should not be a surprise given that previous studies have shown that young adults are disproportionately affected by various forms of online abuse and harassment (e.g. Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Powell and Henry, 2019). In relation to gender, as women appear to experience more significant harms than men from image-based sexual abuse (Powell et al., 2019; Ruvalcaba and Eaton, 2020), it may be that they are more likely than men to identify as victim-survivors and choose to participate in research such as this study.

Further, the limitations of our pool, in terms of ethnicity particularly, meant that we were unable to investigate in depth the ways in which other vectors of marginalisation intersect with gender. Further targeted research on image-based sexual abuse among specific groups, such as minoritised, indigenous, migrant and refugee peoples, gender- and sexuality diverse peoples, sex workers, and those with a disability, is vital to explore intersectional experiences of image-based sexual abuse in more detail.

Data collection, procedures and analysis

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via phone or Skype between November 2017 and July 2018. The interview questions were open-ended, and asked participants about: experiences of image-based sexual abuse; harms and impacts; responses; and future directions. Participants were reimbursed $50 (AUD, NZD) and £40 (UK) in retail vouchers for their time and any travel expenses. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Any potentially identifying information was removed, and all participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Once data collection was complete, the de-identified data were coded and thematically analysed using qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The first stage of coding involved the identification of initial themes, conducted by two separate groups of team members. During joint meetings, these independent lists of themes were examined and synthesised to develop an agreed coding system. These codes were then used for the first analysis of the data set, with further themes and codes being identified as analysis with specific reference to harms and impacts progressed.

The present study is underpinned by a feminist standpoint epistemology and methodology, in that we fundamentally view victim-survivors as having expert knowledge on the harms of image-based sexual abuse, and which we centralise in our analysis (Harding, 2004). However, we have adopted a feminist phenomenological conceptual framework in this paper to discuss our findings because of phenomenology's capacity to holistically conceptualise common aspects of experience, encountered across subjectivities – incorporating into view the contingent body, self, world and other, without recourse to essentialism (see e.g. Conaghan, 2019). As a result of our focus on the

holistic harms and impacts experienced by victim-survivors in this paper, we do not address in detail the different contexts in which image-based sexual abuse occurrs, the motivations of perpetrators, or the agency and resistance of victim-survivors (see Henry et al., 2020).

Research Findings

Overall, participants reported a diverse range of experiences of image-based sexual abuse. A significant majority reported having had nude or sexual images of them distributed without their consent. This included those who had initially shared the nude or sexual images consensually, those who had consented (or had not consented) to others taking images of them, and those who had not known they were being filmed or photographed. Many participants described how images of them were shown to groups of friends or colleagues via mobile phones or mobile apps, or posted on pornographic websites, social media sites, chat rooms or imageboard sites. Many also experienced someone threatening to share nude or sexual images of them, sometimes with the purpose of control and/or coercion into an unwanted act, such as paying money (blackmail), performing a sexual act, sending more images, or controlling the victim-survivor within the context of an on-going or former intimate relationship.

Many also reported that someone had created or taken nude or sexual images of them without their agreement. In some cases, participants were filmed or photographed without their knowledge when they were asleep, or drug- or alcohol-affected, or with the aid of a secret camera. For a very small number of participants, images of them were digitally altered to make them nude or sexual. Others described being pressured or coerced into either having photos or videos taken of them, for example being groomed or coerced into sharing sexual images when they were children by predators online, or by intimate partners as adults. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators were identified as men. For some victim-survivors, they had multiple experiences (by the same perpetrator, or by multiple perpetrators), as well as the image-based sexual abuse occurring in conjunction with, or alongside, multiple experiences of other forms of sexual violence, domestic violence, stalking and sexual harassment – both online and offline. Just under one third of participants experienced the abuse alongside, and or in the context of, other experiences of domestic abuse.

In keeping with Kelly's (1988) continuum-based conceptualisation of the impacts of sexual violence which highlights the complex and non-linear relationship between abuse and the harms experienced, we found that the form or context of image-based sexual abuse did not determine the degree or nature of the harm experienced by victim-survivors, in sequential or prescriptive ways. For example, the harms described by participants who were in (abusive) intimate relationships with the perpetrator at the time of the image-based sexual abuse did not differ, to any great extent, to those whose relationships with the perpetrator were that of casual sexual partners or ex-partners, friends, colleagues, housemates or strangers. Rather, a striking finding from our interviews, across the three countries, was the way in which many victim-survivors talked holistically about the detrimental impacts of their experiences, beyond the commonplace medicalised trauma-based discourses. These descriptions of harms spanned

many victim-survivors' narratives, traversing geographical location, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or specific experience of image-based sexual abuse. In the following sections, we set out five inter-related themes of these holistic harms described by victim-survivors: social rupture; constancy; isolation; existential threat; and constrained liberty.

Social Rupture: 'Devastating, Like It Broke Me' (Faith)

A significant number of our participants described their experience of image-based sexual abuse as one of utter devastation. Participants described feeling 'completely, completely broken' and characterised their experiences as 'life-ruining', 'hell on earth' and 'a nightmare . . . which destroyed everything'.[3] Their narratives conveyed a sense in which the abuse was experienced as a marked and overwhelming breach – or rupture – that radically disrupted their lives, altering their sense of self, their identity and their relationships with their bodies and others. For these participants, their victimisation was experienced as a point of 'fracture' and discontinuity which generated far-reaching change, causing them to delineate their lives and sense of self as 'before' and 'after' the abuse (McGlynn and Johnson, 2018). In Margaret's words, image-based sexual abuse 'impacts your sense of self on every level'. This was echoed by Louise who said 'it completely changes you'. Jennifer similarly reflected: 'it obviously does define my life now . . . it has completely changed my life in horrific ways'. While Anna told us: 'I'm nowhere near the person I once was. That's gone and it's rebuilding a new part of me now'.

While differences in life experience, social identity and age meant that the ramifications of the abuse varied between participants, collectively there was a common experience of the abuse as an extreme, unsettling and intrusive violation. These participants identified the consequential impacts of image-based sexual abuse as all-encompassing and pervasive, as radically altering their everyday life experiences, relationships and activities, causing harms which permeated their personal, professional and digital social worlds: '[it] transcends [everything], it impacts you emotionally, physiologically, professionally, in dating and relationships, in bloody every single factor of your life' (Alana).

Additionally, many victim-surivors reflected on how their experience of image-based sexual abuse was embodied – experienced in and through their bodies, altering their sense of bodily integrity, and their corporeal, social and sexual subjectivity. Jennifer, for example, described how the image-based sexual abuse touched her 'very core' – the harms she described were experienced 'really deep within your body . . . it really penetrates you'. Frances recounted how her awareness of, and relationship with her body has changed since the abuse in that she now feels very 'conscious' of her body and uncomfortable if anyone gets 'too close'. Anna commented:

> I've changed my hair colour. I intentionally put on weight, because I was quite thin and I always had quite an athletic sort of figure, and it sounds so ridiculous because I intentionally made myself put on [substantial weight] so people wouldn't [recognise me]. (Anna)

We invoke the notion of 'social rupture' here as a means of encapsulating and better understanding the experiences of a significant number, though not all, of our participants, who spoke of the totality of harm experienced, conveying at that time a sense of complete devastation. In so doing, we are building on works which examine the biographical disruption embodied in narratives or testimonies of traumatic experiences – the radical undoing of the self – in order to convey the way in which such experiences can profoundly disturb situated understandings of the self, the world and others (Brison, 2003; Brockmeier, 2008; Bury, 1982; Du Toit, 2009; Langer, 1991). This approach allows us to move beyond decontextualised, discretely-conceived forms of psychological injury or distress, as conceived in some medicalised trauma-based frameworks, to better represent and understand how the impacts of image-based sexual abuse can unfold across the *entirety* of participants' lifeworlds, as they relate to and interact with others.

Previous phenomenological works also discuss the processual experience and consequence of sexual violence in terms of disjointedness, intrustion and fracture (e.g. Brison, 2003, Du Toit, 2009). Within these works, this sense of discontinuity has been used to convey the *nature* of traumatic experience. In contrast, our intention is to foreground the systemic intrusion experienced by victim-survivors as a harm in its own right – conceived as an *ontological violation* generated by image-based sexual abuse which can inflect harm across all facets of an individual's lifeworld. In this way, social rupture provides a conceptual framework which reveals the holistic, situated and relational nature of harms – relocating the locus of 'harm' from the individual and/or their symptoms (as in medicalised trauma models), to the entirety of the social fabric of the victim-survivor's life, to the wholeness of their being-in-world.

The idea of social rupture, therefore, also permits us to understand the harms generated by image-based sexual abuse as *contextual*, where its meaning and consequences are inflected by and contingent upon a range of interlocking factors, such as victim-survivors' particular social locations, intersectional identities and experiences in relation to broader systemic and structural inequalities, such as misogyny, racism, ableism and heterosexism (see also Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018). It enables us to see the socially constructed nature of these harms and that they are heightened in particular social and political contexts, such as where dominant sexual scripts legitimise forms of victim-blaming, minimisation and harassment.

For example, many of our women participants, whose experiences embody the concept of social rupture, described not only of the systemic violation of having their images shared without consent, but also how they felt 'degraded', 'mortified', 'ashamed, 'disgusted' with themselves, and 'stupid', reflecting gendered social expectations, and sexual scripts. They reflected on how they were blamed for the abuse, and were subjected to sexualised insults. Several women participants spoke about the 'worst' harm (hypothetical or realised) being their families finding out about the abuse: 'The worst thing . . . is the shame of your parents being disappointed. . . . I don't want my family . . . to even know that I'm a sexual being' (Georgia).

In addition, some participants reflected on the intersectional nature of the harms and the further consequences, risks and barriers these can generate. Tia, for example, told us that not only was her experience of abuse deeply violating, but it also potentially

jeopardised her safety by putting her at increased risk of so-called 'honour-based' violence. Moreover, Amara described how the harassment and victim-blaming she experienced were inflected with racism and misogyny:

> I got a lot of hate and a lot of it was because I'm brown skinned, I'm a woman of colour . . . I had racialised hate and misogynistic hate, and the commentary was, 'You're ugly and gross' . . . 'You're asking for it' . . . 'you're a slut, you're a whore' . . . 'what do you expect?'

Constancy: 'A Level of Permanence Which Affects Everything' (Maya)

Most of our participants spoke of the relentless, constant nature of the harms experienced; of their 'ongoingness' and 'endlessness'. For some this was reflected in the continuing nature of the abuse itself, of living each day in 'utter fear' that the images would be (re)discovered. The material was 'out there', beyond their control: constantly available to be shared online, viewed and re-discovered, with each viewing or distribution another iteration of the abuse:

> It is permanent . . . and so people know it, you can't not know it. . . . Maybe you could have something happen to you that was traumatic, but you don't have to necessarily feel like you're defined by it for the rest of your life. But with this, there's such a level of permanence which affects everything . . . especially if it's impossible now to take photos down, especially if it's impossible to stop the dissemination of the images. . . . There will never be a day in my entire lifetime that all of the images of me could ever be deleted. (Maya)

Anna also reflected on the seeming infinitude of the acts of image-based sexual abuse:

> There is no end to it, there is no stop, there is no finale. . . . It's like, I'm quite aware that if I was to go on the internet or the porn websites now, I would . . . find the videos of me. . . . It's a crime that doesn't just happen and then that's done. It's something that is continual, and this could continue for I don't know how long. It could go on for bloody ever.

Some spoke of constantly 'feeling on the edge'. As Stephen described:

> [It's become] a hidden obsession to always check my phone . . . And that's kind of become the way that I've coped with it, constantly checking my phone, to the detriment of like my work.

Reminiscent of Brison's (2003: 45) description of embodied traumatic memories of sexual violence, particularly the effects of the lingering, sensory, physiological and emotional intrusions or 'flashbacks' in everyday life, other participants in our study spoke of the ubiquity of the images in their lives: 'you have the image in your head, and it revisits and it revisits and revisits. . . . It haunts you . . . ' (Alana).

Existential Threat: 'I Live With It All the Time, Just Waiting' (Anna)

Merging into this sense of constancy, and due to the very real possibility of the abuse continuing or re-emerging, is the unnerving sense of fear, worry and uncertainty experienced by some. Heather described this as follows: 'It was more constant apprehension, every time I was getting an email or a message, it was, 'Is this somebody telling me it's finally been shared'? For Louise, being subject to threats to disclose sexual images was overwhelming and life-threatening: 'I was embarrassed and I was ashamed . . . and I felt stupid. Even now I'm still not sure whether or not she will send them . . . I took an overdose'.

As with some other forms of violence and abuse, the ongoing threat, cumulative fear and constraint it can engender, crossed time and space, and persisted almost regardless of how victim-survivors responded. As Stephen further explained:

> [It's] having this continuing threat that the images could be re-shared, or re-emerge online, that new people could see these intimate images. . . . And I think it's the unknowing; that not knowing aspect that you have to deal with every day.

Victim-surivors described feeling they needed to be perpetually vigilant, ready to take action should the threat materialise, in either their 'online' or 'offline' interactions. Many described how they continuously check the internet, particularly pornography websites or social media, in case their images have been (re-)posted. Others described hyper-analysing all of their social interactions, trying to establish and manage who might know about, or have seen, their sexual images, and consequently harbour negative opinions of them, often generating additional harms in their professional and personal lives.

These experiences demonstrate how the constancy of image-based sexual abuse can create a particularly pernicious violation – a sense of ongoing, existential threat which can cast a shadow over victim-survivors' lives. This was particularly the case for participants situated in precarious contexts, underpinned by unequal power relations (see also Johnson, 2017). In such circumstances, victim-survivors were often denied the instrumental means to protect themselves from harm, and thereby exercise some measure of control or containment of the abuse and its subsequent fallout (e.g. they were unable to reclaim their intimate images, or have them removed from the internet). Consequently, participants spoke of a sense of feeling 'trapped', for example, with the knowledge their images are 'out of [their] control', 'hanging over' them. Moreover, these precarious contexts embody systemic oppressions, in terms of patriarchy, misogyny and racism – all of which co-produce, shape and extend the harms experienced. This closely parallels the harms experienced by victim-survivors of other forms of sustained abuse, such as domestic abuse experienced as a pattern of coercive control which occurs 'along a broad spatial and temporal continuum' (Stark, 2009: 1517), aggravated by the structural inequities of gender, race and class. Furthermore, this existential threat holds true beyond the context of intimate partnerships. The seemingly interminable and indomitable nature of the internet renders the potential threat limitless – extending across social relationships to encounters with faceless strangers.

Isolation: 'It Made Me Very Reclusive in General' (Danielle)

Image-based sexual abuse can engender a profound sense of isolation from family and friends, from the online world and, therefore, from society as a whole. Often this is due to a profound breach of trust, not only in relation to the abuser, but from family, friends, the internet and the world around them (see also Bates, 2017; Short et al., 2017). Due to the constancy of image-based sexual abuse, and its continuing impacts, these isolating and destablising effects can themselves be ongoing and intense. Thus, many victim-survivors told us that following the abuse, they withdrew from their social lives and relationships:

> I cut myself off from all of my friends. I cut myself off from my family . . . and just stayed at home in my room . . . because I couldn't face the world. (Faith)

The isolation was often compounded by the negative reactions of others, both anticipated and realised, compelling victim-survivors to 'go into hiding' (Lucy) or 'hide in shame' (Linda). Heather explained, 'I had nobody to turn to because everyone had turned against me, so I was totally isolated.' Other participants similarly described feeling 'judged', 'alone' and 'unsupported' which only exacerbated the suffering they experienced. Maya, for example, told us:

> It was so isolating . . . especially getting hate [online and] from "friends" who don't want to associate with you . . . because you're associated with something [they perceive to be] explicit and gross. Oftentimes I feel like the people you think would get it don't. . . . It is so harmful and isolating.

This meant that many of our participants felt they could no longer 'trust anyone' or 'anything', and that they had to be 'suspicious of everyone', with their loss of 'faith' permeating their lives. Margaret explained: 'My trust . . . has been shattered on so many levels'. This aligns with DiTullio and Sullivan's (2019) assertion that image-based sexual abuse can impact on an individual's relationships, from a relational and systemic perspective, engendering an 'intense shift' towards a position of lack of trust which can have a marked effect on individuals' lives.

Again highlighting the contextual and relational dimensions of the harms, many women participants emphasised the gendered impact of this isolation and lack of trust. Rachel described this as follows: 'Especially men, I just had a big distrust in them and I thought they are all out there to, sort of, do horrible things to you if you don't give them what they want.' This was echoed by Alison who stated: 'I would say that [the abuse] has definitely affected my trust in men specifically.' Colleen similarly explained that: 'With strangers . . . I just never trust people the way I used to and I'm always more closed off with males. Not towards females, it's just always with males, and I know that that's awful but it's just the way it is.'

Many victim-survivors also told us that their continual living in fear, and the constancy of the harms they experienced, negatively affected their experiences and trust of digital space, exacerbating any sense of isolation. Many came to see the internet as a dangerous place which they could not 'trust', they no longer felt 'safe' online, and

instead viewed it as a site of potential re-traumatisation. Jennifer told us how she felt 'terrified' at the thought of going back on social media, for fear of 'opening something back up'. Julia also described: 'in a lot of ways it sort of isolates you even more in this day and age. . . . I'm not on anything other than Facebook . . . because I'm just petrified. It's just a scary, scary thought and I don't know who's watching'. This was echoed by Lucy: 'I don't really have an online presence anymore because I'm just so terrified of . . . people contacting me because they've seen these pictures.'

Consequently, some victim-survivors completely shut down their online profiles, with many others severely restricting their online information and interactions. When some returned to social media, it was an entirely different experience and practice compared to before the abuse, involving less interaction, reduced use and fewer communications. Thus, the abuse markedly affected peoples' online interactions. It was no longer a positive social activity, but a 'necessary evil' in today's world. This echoes research from the European Women's Lobby (2017: 17) which found that online abuse engenders 'isolation' as one of its real-world effects. They note that 'all the objects that empower them [women] on a personal and professional level become off-limits'. In more stark terms, these lived realities resonsate with Scarry's (1985: 40) description of how ordinary objects, in the context of torture, lose their everyday meaning and are themselves turned into instruments of torture.

Constrained Liberty: 'That Feeling of Vulnerability . . . Distrust . . . and Being Unsafe Actually Affects You Potentially Forever' (Clara)

In the context of a sense of omnipresent threat of experiencing further sexual violence, including image-based sexual abuse, many women participants talked about feeling consciously 'unsafe'. They reported experiencing a sense of jeopardy, distrust and wariness of men which permeated their experiences in public spaces, as well as their broader experience of the world in which they are situated. Some participants described how they subsequently felt they had to be constantly 'aware' of their surroundings, and take steps to protect themselves from men in intimate and broader social relationships; and from strangers, as well as safeguard other women and girls in their lives. Clara, for example, told us that she would deliberately cover up her and her daughters' bodies with extra clothing when in public spaces, to deter (further) sexualised abuse or harassment:

> I don't feel like I can feel comfortable walking down the street, without having sort of extra layers on, just in case. The chances are probably quite small but . . . I feel like I sort of have to protect myself and my daughters.

Connecting this sense of jeopardy in public spaces, with a more systemic (lack of) safety when living within a wider culture of sexism and misogyny, Alana explained:

> Like my whole sense of safety in the world [has been] profoundly damaged. . . . If I go online or I go to a shopping centre or a public place and I'm just bombarded with sexualised images of women and children, . . . [it] just brings up all that trauma and just the proliferation of it, the extent of it. . . . The enormity of it is such a burden.

These reflections speak to Brison's (2003: 56) suggestion that, for some, the lived experience of rape 'shatters fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it'. This can generate perceptions that the world is a hostile place, imbued with the 'imminent potentiality' of further harm (Cahill, 2008: 810; Du Toit, 2009). In this way, we can see how the threat and lack of trust women experienced extends beyond individual men to encompass what Gavey (2012: 722) refers to as the 'cultural conditions of possibility'; namely the current socio-symbolic context of gender inequality (see also Cahill, 2008; Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018 which speaks to further intersectional oppressions).

These experiences of unease and jeopardy, which were engendered or compounded by the image-based sexual abuse, connects with the extensive literature which recognises that women's experiences of spaces are inflected by the threat and fear of sexualised harassment, abuse and violence from men (Brison, 2003; Pain, 1993; Stanko, 1987; Valentine, 1989; Vera-Gray, 2017a). As with the notion of existential threat, victim-survivors told us how, in markedly gendered ways, the sense of living in a hostile world, pervaded by misogyny and underpinned by the possibility of sexual violence, constrained their liberty and what has been termed their 'space for action' (Jeffner, 2000 cited in Vera-Gray, 2017b; Kelly, 2003; Lundgren, 1998). This idea focuses on how individual perpetrators, together with broader social expectations, opportunities and experiences, can constrain victim-survivors choices, options and therefore their 'space' for taking 'action' and exercising agency. It aligns with the idea of how experiencing some forms of abuse, in the context in which we live, can constrain one's 'horizons of possibility' (Vera-Gray, 2017b) by serving to limit what seems viable in a world where a pervasive sense of existential threat may also exist. Crucially, this notion does not erase agency, but recognises that our agency is exercised in context.

Importantly, this is a situated experience, varying according to each individual's positions with intersecting axes of power and privilege. Thus, experiences of reduced 'space for action' will vary according to each individual, being particularly felt in situations of precarity, and where multiple and interlocking oppressions and inequalities intersect. Nevertheless, participants commonly told us that the abuse 'narrowed down [their] world', making it 'small and claustrophobic'; they felt like they had to 'limit' themselves and their lives, to be 'closed' and 'put walls up' to 'keep [themselves] safe'. Some victim-survivors reflected that this in itself constituted a harm which negatively inhibits their everyday lives, adversely altering their sense of belonging and freedom in the world, and subsequently their participation in public life and experiences of citizenship.

These reflections evoke Stark's (2007: 13) assertion that to understand harm comprehensively, we must not only look at what is 'done' to victim-survivors, but also what they are stopped from doing. In other words, image-based sexual abuse comprises a 'liberty crime' (Stark, 2007) with enduring impacts which restrict a victim-survivor's 'right to everyday life' (Beebeejaun, 2017). All of these interconnected forms of harm are threats to victim-survivors' liberty, diminishing their capacity for freedom, connection and dignity.

Conclusions: 'It's Torture for the Soul' (Anna)

After Anna described in detail the impact of having sexual images of her shared without her consent, she summed up her whole experience by saying: 'It's torture for the soul, it really is'. This evocative metaphor encapsulates the all-encompassing, ongoing and often devastating harms which some victim-survivors experience and which has yet to be fully recognised. Thus, while criminal laws and policies have been introduced with the aim of challenging image-based sexual abuse, understanding of the harms of these behaviours has so far been limited and often somewhat reductive. This lack of recognition, of the extent and nature of the potential harms of image-based sexual abuse, can be understood as a form of hermeneutical injustice for victim-survivors. As Giladi (2018: 152) states, the 'principal harmfulness of hermeneutic injustice consists of depriving a victim of having access to the self-interpretational dimension of rational agency'. In other words, because the harms of image-based sexual abuse are not sufficiently recognised, victim-survivors struggle to understand, narrate and name their experiences. Many participants in our study knew that their own experiences had been profoundly devastating, but struggled to make sense of that in a society where such acts of abuse are so often excused, minimised and normalised.

Accordingly, we have suggested that a feminist phenomenological approach can help us to better understand and recognise a fuller range of victim-survivors' experiences. In particular, we identified five main themes that we termed social rupture, constancy, existential threat, isolation and constrained liberty. These harms are interconnected, fluid and are experienced differently by victim-survivors depending on their particular context and positionality. Our development of these themes, and recognition of the often significant harms of image-based sexual abuse, is not to suggest an essentialist way of understanding or experiencing these abuses or their harms. Rather, we are arguing for the importance of recognising the fluidity of such experiences across time and space, and the ways they are both connected to and distinct from other forms of sexual violence and inequality.

We are keenly aware of the risk that in seeking to emphasise and gain recognition for particular understandings of harm, we may reify a particular experience, particularly when any 'new truths' are rigidly applied. This can lead to an ostensibly more enlightened and sensitive framework of meaning bringing forth its 'own ways of othering, stigmatizing, violating, and potentially obstructing avenues of support and understanding for women who have experienced rape' (Gavey and Schmidt, 2011: 452). Therefore, despite the significant themes identified, it is important to re-emphasise the experiential, contingent and intersectional nature of the harms we describe, with each experience located in a particular time, place and context. We must recognise image-based sexual abuse as socially constructed, premised on gendered cultural values, attitudes and practices that are amenable to change.

We also want to stress that this situated approach does not deny or seek to diminish victim-survivors' agency, resistance, or capacity for healing, recovery and survival. Indeed, for Anna, while characterising her experience as 'torture for the soul', she also spoke of 'rebuilding a new me'. Others emphasised their determination to use their experience to support others, and to resist perpetrators' narratives by re-claiming their

sexual agency and autonomy. Ultimately, many participated in this project not only to share their stories and engender a better understanding of the harms and impacts of image-based sexual abuse, but also to be part of a movement for change (see also McGlynn et al., 2019). They sought to regain control over their narratives, as well as helping to shift understanding and attitudes torwards image-based sexual abuse, with the aim of interrupting and reshaping current laws, policies, attitudes and practices.

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Notes

1. Indigenous approaches also explain the meaning, causes, and effects of sexual violence in profoundly contextual and holistic ways. Māori scholars, for instance, explain how Māori experience views discrete acts of sexual violence within a wider historical and sociocultural context, including recognising the ongoing relevance of colonisation and coloniality in both contributing to its causes, and compounding its harms (e.g. Cavino 2016; Pihama et al. 2016; Wilson et al. 2019). Furthermore, as Pihama et al. (2016: 48) explains, for Māori, the harms of sexual violence are felt, 'not only as a form of physical violence but also as a cultural and spiritual transgression that impacts both the individual and the collective wellbeing of their entire whakapapa line [genealogy] and whanau [extended family]. What that means is that acts of sexual violence are considered to be acts of both individual and collective violence'.
2. The larger project, 'Revenge Pornography: the implications for law reform', was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP170101433) (PI Nicola Henry, RMIT University). The project team comprised the authors of this article as well as Adrian Scott of Goldsmiths, University of London.
3. Throughout the findings sections, we use a variety of quotes from our interviews. While we provide the pseudonym of participants for longer quotes, we have chosen not do this for shorter, often one-word quotations. This is because many of the words were used by multiple participants (as many as $n = 15$ in some cases), and even more participants conveyed experiences

which resonated with these terms, even if they did not use the identical word. We decided on this approach to avoid creating a hierarchy between participants and/or quotes (on the basis of frequency used) in the depiction of short phrases.

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