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**Image-Based Sexual Abuse as a Means of Coercive Control:
Victim-Survivor Experiences**

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AUTHORS' NOTE

This article draws on a broader international study on image-based sexual abuse in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, which involved 75 semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors, 43 stakeholder interviews, and national surveys with a total of 6,109 respondents. We acknowledge the contributions of the Chief Investigators and Partner

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KEY WORDS

image-based sexual abuse; non-consensual pornography; intimate partner abuse; domestic violence; coercive control

ABSTRACT

Scholars and practitioners increasingly acknowledge the ways that abusive partners create, distribute, or threaten to distribute, intimate images without consent, yet little empirical research has comprehensively explored image-based sexual abuse within intimate partner contexts. This article responds to this gap and reports on the findings of a study involving interviews with 29 women and one gender diverse person who experienced image-based sexual abuse as part of a pattern of “coercive control.” The authors argue that abusive partners use intimate imagery as a means of exerting power and control, and as a tactic of intimidation, entrapment, and degradation. They note that law, policy, and practice responses should recognize the gendered nature of image-based sexual abuse and its growing use as a means of coercive control.

INTRODUCTION

Abusive partners routinely use digital technologies to control, intimidate, degrade, and isolate their intimate partners. Scholars and practitioners refer to this as “technology-facilitated domestic violence,” focusing on behaviors such as harassing or threatening messages, repeated unwanted contact, surveillance, GPS tracking, impersonation, “doxing,” computer hacking, restricting access to technology, and image-based sexual abuse (see e.g., Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz, 2019; Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2007; Woodlock, 2017). Harris and Woodlock (2019) have described technology-facilitated abuse in intimate partner contexts as “digital coercive control.” Coercive control refers to a pattern of abusive behavior that functions to enforce relations of domination and subordination which in turn serves to constrain both liberty and equality.[1] Coercive control is “ongoing rather than episodic,” and abusive partners use “various means to hurt, humiliate, intimidate, exploit, isolate, and dominate their victims,” resulting in a pattern of cumulative oppression (Stark, 2007, p. 4, p. 12).

Victim support advocates and domestic violence sector workers have increasingly acknowledged the role that image-based sexual abuse plays in the perpetration of intimate partner abuse (Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz, 2019; Henry & Powell, 2015; Woodlock, 2017). Image-based sexual abuse refers to the non-consensual taking or sharing of nude or sexual images (photos or videos), including making threats to share intimate images (Henry et al., 2021; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Powell & Henry, 2017).[2] In the context of an intimate relationship, image-based sexual abuse can include any of the following acts: the taking or sharing nude or sexual images without consent; threats to share intimate images to coerce a partner into sharing more intimate images or engage them in an unwanted act; and/or the recording and/or dissemination of sexual assault imagery.

While there has been increasing acknowledgement of the nexus between image-based sexual abuse and intimate partner abuse (e.g., Brown, Sanci, & Hegarty, 2021; Cuomo & Dolci, 2021; Harris & Woodlock, 2018; Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz, 2019), most studies to date have not specifically focused on image-based sexual abuse, but rather on a range of different abusive behaviors involving digital technologies. This means that few empirical studies have comprehensively examined image-based sexual abuse as part of a pattern of partner abuse.

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with 30 victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse (29 women and one gender diverse person) from Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. It explores their experiences as well as their reflections on the perpetration of image-based sexual abuse within an intimate relationship, where in all cases the image-based sexual abuse was perpetrated by a male partner. We use the concept of “coercive control” as a useful theoretical framework for understanding partner-perpetrated image-based sexual abuse – as a manifestation of gendered power and control that often underpins a broader, unidirectional, and cumulative pattern of intimate partner violence (Stark, 2007; 2009). We use the term “partner” to refer to a former or current intimate, romantic, or sexual partner, including marriage, defacto, cohabiting, or non-cohabiting partners, as well as partners in more casual yet ongoing relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology-Facilitated Abuse

Technology-facilitated abuse is an umbrella term used to describe a range of abusive acts involving the use of digital technologies, such as mobile phones, email, text and instant messaging, GPS, webcams, dating apps, video chat, and social media (see Bailey, Flynn, & Henry, 2021; Henry, Flynn, & Powell, 2020; Powell & Henry, 2017). Qualitative and quantitative studies have focused on a range of behaviors perpetrated across a spectrum of relationship contexts, including by intimate partners, as well as acquaintances and strangers –

such as cyberstalking (e.g., Dimond et al., 2011; Reynolds, Henson, & Fisher, 2012), hate speech (e.g., Jane, 2014; OeSC, 2020), image-based sexual harassment (e.g., Mandau, 2020; Oswald et al., 2019), online sexual harassment (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2010; Douglass et al., 2018), sexual assault victimization via online dating sites or apps (e.g., Gillett, 2019; Rowse et al., 2019), and image-based sexual abuse (e.g., Henry et al., 2021; McGlynn et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2019). Digital devices, tools, and platforms provide abusive partners with the convenient means to enact harassment, humiliation, and control – owing to the intimate knowledge they may have of their partner, including access to their usernames, passwords, devices, intimate images, and other personal information.

To capture the unique manifestations of technology-facilitated abuse within intimate relationships, scholars have adopted different terms to refer to overlapping behaviors. These include “intimate cyberstalking” (McFarland & Bocij, 2003), “intimate partner digital abuse” (Ybarra, Price-Feeney, Lenhart, & Zickuhr, 2017), “intimate partner cyber aggression” (Marganski & Melander, 2018), “technology-facilitated stalking” (Woodlock, 2017), and “digital dating abuse” (e.g., Borrajo et al., 2015; Burke et al., 2011; Hellevik, 2019; Martinez-Pecino & Durán, 2019). In intimate partner relationships, these acts often fit within a broader pattern of “coercive control.” This has led scholars to label intimate partner forms of technology-facilitated abuse as “technology-facilitated domestic violence” (Douglas et al., 2019; OeSC, 2019), “technology-enabled coercive control” (Cuomo & Dolci, 2021), or “digital coercive control,” defined as “the use of devices and digital media to stalk, harass, threaten and abuse partners or ex-partners (and children) ... within a wider setting of sex-based inequality” (Harris & Woodlock, 2018, p. 533).

Image-Based Sexual Abuse

The term “revenge porn” was coined in the mid-2000s to describe the actions of vengeful ex-partners disseminating non-consensual nude or sexual images online to “get back

at an ex” for infidelity or ending the relationship. The phenomenon was further popularized by the growing number of websites that allowed users to post images alongside the personal details of the victim, such as their name, age, occupation, address, and other information (known as “doxing”).

While media and scholarly attention to the phenomenon of “revenge porn” has typically focused on behaviors in the context of former intimate relationships, there has been less focus on how image-based sexual abuse forms *part of a pattern of intimate partner abuse*. To some extent this can be attributed to the limitations of the term itself. First, as scholars and others have pointed out, the term “revenge porn” is a misnomer because not all perpetrators are motivated by revenge when they share nude or sexual images without consent (Franks, 2017). Instead, they may be motivated by reasons related to controlling and dominating their partner or former partner, reinforcing certain constructions of masculine identity or status, reasons related to their sexual interests, or a combination of reasons (Citron & Franks, 2014; Henry et al., 2021). Second, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images does not happen exclusively after a relationship breaks down and may occur as part of a pattern of abusive behavior while the relationship is ongoing. And third, image-based sexual abuse behaviors are not limited to images being shared without consent and may also include: pressure or coercion to take or share images; the taking or creation of images without consent (sometimes surreptitiously – e.g., secret recordings in bedrooms or bathrooms); or threatening to share intimate images with others to prevent the partner leaving the relationship, or to coerce, humiliate, or punish them in some way.

Increasingly, scholars are turning their attention to the prevalence, nature, and impacts of image-based sexual abuse within intimate partner contexts. Quantitative studies, for instance, have shown that pressure to share intimate images and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images are relatively common among intimate partners – both

teenagers (see e.g., Bianchi et al., 2021; Brown, Sanci, & Hegarty, 2021; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013) and adults (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015; Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015; Marganski & Melander, 2018; Morelli et al., 2016; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2017). It is important to note, however, that surveys may underestimate the true prevalence of image-based sexual abuse because people may not know that images of them are being taken or shared by their partners – who may be secretly disseminating images online or via mobile devices (Henry & Flynn, 2019). Furthermore, surveys are often unable to capture the broader contexts that can help to clarify the different meanings and impacts of the same behaviors (Brown & Hegarty, 2021). Just as with intimate partner abuse more generally, this can lead to findings that misrepresent the gendered patterns of perpetration and victimization (for discussions see Dobash, Dobash, Wilson & Daly, 1992; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; see also Gavey, 2019).

To date, there have been few qualitative studies with victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse (see Aborisade, 2021; Bates, 2017; Henry et al., 2021; Mandau, 2021; McGlynn et al., 2021), or with victim-survivors of technology-facilitated abuse more broadly (see Cuomo & Dolci, 2021; Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz, 2019; Henry, Vasil, Flynn, Kellard, & Mortreux, 2021; Leitão, 2021). There are even fewer qualitative studies focusing exclusively or comprehensively on victim-survivor experiences of image-based sexual abuse in the context intimate partner abuse. In one study, Eaton et al. (2020) undertook content analysis of 366 US news articles published over a 5-year period. They found that in 90.71% of articles, the perpetrator was described through at least one spoke of the Power and Control Wheel, with the most described tactic being emotional abuse, which includes “humiliating and putting down one’s partner, making someone feel guilty or bad about themselves, and playing mind games” (Eaton et al., 2020, p. 5). In another study, Cuomo and Dolci (2021, p. 229) undertook six interviews with victim-survivors of technology-enabled coercive control, describing the

diverse ways in which abusers distributed non-consensual intimate images to “keep a survivor in a relationship or coerce a survivor back to a relationship.” They also noted that image-based sexual abuse extended a form of “temporal control” over the survivor long after the relationship had ended, and for some survivors, the impacts were even more pronounced because of culture, gender, or sexuality.

Overall, little empirical research has been undertaken on the phenomenon of image-based sexual abuse within the broader context of intimate partner abuse. This study responds to this gap with the purpose of exploring the experiences of victim-survivors to understand the dynamics of partner-perpetrated image-based sexual abuse.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This section reports on the methods and findings of 30 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with victim-survivors who had experienced image-based sexual abuse as part of a pattern of intimate partner abuse.[3] The findings we report here are based on the following research questions: What are the experiences of victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse whose abuse was perpetrated by intimate partners? How do these experiences fit within a broader pattern of intimate partner abuse? And what are the common characteristics of partner-perpetrated image-based sexual abuse?

Method

Design

The research used a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse, which received ethics approval from a university human ethics committee in mid-2017.[4] We drew on a feminist interpretivist epistemology to explore an “understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman, 2004, p. 266). The methodology allows for acknowledgment of the importance of “subjugated knowledge” and the

“complexities of differences of experiences that have not previously been considered” (Letherby, 2002, p. 75).

Participants

Participants were recruited using a variety of methods, including messaging across Facebook and Twitter networks, electronic and hard-copy distribution of recruitment advertisements, snowball sampling through victim-support organizations and networks, and paid Facebook advertising with targeted recruitment across a range of genders, ages, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups, and geographic locations. Recruitment notices advised that we were seeking to interview people who had experienced someone taking or sharing, or threatening to share, an intimate photograph or video of them without their consent. Because we recruited, more broadly, participants who had had any experience of image-based sexual abuse (and not specifically experiences in which intimate partners had been the perpetrators), there was no mention of intimate partner abuse in the recruitment materials. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and living in Australia, New Zealand, or the UK. They were also required to have experienced at least one form of image-based sexual abuse, as determined by self-identification in response to the behavioral descriptions noted above. Potential participants were required to contact the research team via phone or email and were then engaged by a member of the research team.

In the broader study, 75 Australian, New Zealand, and UK participants were interviewed (89.3% women; 8.0% men; 2.6% gender-diverse). Interviews were conducted in person (n=57), by telephone (n=17), or via Skype (n=1), and lasted for approximately 60 minutes. The majority of the 75 participants we interviewed (n=58, 77%) had experienced image-based sexual abuse by an intimate partner[5] and over a third of participants across the full sample (n=30, 40%) described having experienced image-based sexual abuse as part of an ongoing *pattern of coercive and controlling behavior*. [6] Our analysis focuses only on those

30 participants who explicitly reported a pattern of abuse by either a current or former partner at the time of the image-based sexual abuse (no participants at the time of the interview were in an existing intimate relationship with the perpetrator).

The majority of the 30 participants disclosing ongoing partner abuse were aged 18-29 years ($n = 21, 70\%$), followed by those aged 30-39 years ($n = 6, 20\%$), and over 40 years ($n = 3, 10\%$). Twenty-nine participants (97%) were women, and one participant was gender diverse, describing their gender identity as “null gender.” Most participants ($n = 28, 93\%$) identified as White, European, or Pākehā,[7] while the other two participants did not report their ethnicity or racial identity. Finally, two-thirds of participants identified as heterosexual/straight ($n=20, 66\%$), while the remaining 34% identified as bisexual ($n = 6, 20\%$), lesbian ($n = 1, 3\%$), self-identified “other” ($n = 2, 6\%$), or “undecided” ($n = 1, 3\%$). It is important to note that, irrespective of how participants identified their sexuality, the image-based sexual abuse that they described in the context of an intimate relationship was in all cases perpetrated by an intimate male partner.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted by members of the research team who had significant prior experience in conducting interviews with victim-survivors of sexual and domestic violence, and who were attentive to the importance of participants’ wellbeing during the interviews. This included paying attention to pacing, exhibiting sensitivity regarding eliciting details, and informing participants that they did not have to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with and that they could take a break at any time. The team were also careful to respond in ways that were affirming and not inadvertently victim-blaming. Participants were informed that they were able to withdraw from the research and receive a follow-up debrief from a member of the research team after the interview if they wished. Participants were given a store

voucher (\$50AUD, \$50NZD, or £40) as a token of appreciation for their contribution, and compensation for any travel costs.

The interview schedule was centered on the following domains: the participant's experiences (e.g., what happened to them and by whom); impacts (e.g., the physical, psychological, economic, and social consequences); responses (e.g., support services and resources; police responses; and legal and non-legal forms of justice; actions taken by participants; and actions taken by others); and future directions (e.g., what would they like to see happen). While participants were not directly asked if they had experienced the image-based sexual abuse as part of a broader context of domestic or sexual violence, participants were asked about their relationship with the person who had perpetrated the image-based sexual abuse, and to share their understanding of that person's reasons for doing it.

With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by an external transcription company. The research team then anonymized the transcripts, removing any potentially identifying details. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to help protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Coding and Analysis

The de-identified data were thematically coded by the research team using the NVivo 12 software program. Several measures and strategies were put in place to increase confidence in the trustworthiness and validity of the research, such as: methodological coherence (ensuring the research questions matched the methods); appropriate and adequate sampling; meticulous record keeping (including audit trails for the coding process); triangulation; and systematic coding (see e.g., Morse et al., 2002; Noble & Smith, 2015). Deductive and inductive coding was also undertaken by two separate groups of team members. The two coding sets were then merged after repeated meetings and discussion among the team until agreement was reached on the agreed analytic framework to be used to systematically code the data. This approach

provided space for investigator expertise, flexibility, and reflexivity to be incorporated into the code refining process. Codes were then used for the first pilot analysis of the dataset by the two separate groups of team members (including by the first and third authors) using an initial sample of five interview transcripts to identify further themes and develop existing ones.

In the data analysis, we focussed on two main tasks: (1) identifying the main patterns of victim-survivors' experiences of image-based sexual abuse; and (2) identifying the key tactics used in the perpetration of image-based sexual abuse as a means of power and control. The main patterns of victim-survivors' experiences were: (a) pressure to take or share intimate images; (b) the non-consensual taking of intimate images; (c) the non-consensual sharing of intimate images; and (d) threats made to share intimate images (see Table 1). The key tactics participants described were: (a) intimidation; (b) entrapment; and (c) degradation (see Table 2).

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Abuse in the Context of Partner Abuse

Participants in our study reported multiple and diverse experiences of image-based sexual abuse in the context of ongoing abuse by their current or former partners (at the time of the abuse). Here we first report on four main forms of abuse that participants discussed. In describing these forms, victim-survivors highlighted how these abusive acts were perpetrated within the context of coercive control.

Pressure to Take or Share Intimate Images

In discussing their experiences of pressure to take or share images, participants described how their abusive partners demanded intimate images to exert further control over them, and to entrap them in the relationship. Taylor (NZ), for instance, said her partner put pressure on her to take photos of herself and share them with him to show she was “ready for sex.” Frances (UK) was pressured by her partner to take and share intimate images with him, which gradually became a means by which he would control her. She said that although she wasn’t happy to do this “the threat of being hit, like physically abused, was greater. So I just said OK [but] I wasn’t comfortable with it.”

The Non-Consensual Taking of Intimate Images

Participants described being photographed or filmed by their partners without their consent. Penny (NZ), for example, mentioned how the non-consensual taking of intimate images of her was just one dimension of a “terrible relationship” in which her male partner was “extremely manipulative.” Some spoke about their intimate partners filming or photographing them without their knowledge or consent when they were asleep, drug or alcohol affected, in a state of undress, or in the shower. Katherine (UK) told us that her partner had been taking photos of her without her knowledge, which she later found in a computer folder alongside images of his ex-wife. Others described consensual sexual encounters being recorded by intimate partners without their knowledge. For instance, Rachel (NZ) found out that her partner had been secretly filming her:

[He] was really into secretly filming us when we were having sex. So, quite a few times I would, sort of, turn around and see that he was filming, and then I would grab his phone and take it off him, delete the thing and say, ‘You can’t do that. That’s totally not allowed’, so there were, sort of, warning signs there ...

Several participants said they were non-consensually filmed by their intimate partners while they were being subject to sexual assault. One woman, Jen (NZ), for instance, found a

storage device with a video of her partner raping with her while she was unconscious after having taken a drug that produces strong sedative effects. Linda (Aus) similarly recounted her partner filming them she was while she was unconscious:

Quite a few years ago now my partner and me had been drinking things and then he gave me a bit of something else that I hadn't ever had and basically, I was quite unconscious. He filmed a video of us. I wasn't actually aware of it at the time [...] I became aware of it when my friends started talking to me about this video that they'd all seen. So it turns out that he had shared that video with his guy friends over a few drinks [...] It was a pretty yuck video to see.

Similar to Linda, not only did participants experience the non-consensual taking of intimate images, they also described how their partners shared or distributed their images within a broader pattern of controlling and oppressive behaviors.

The Non-Consensual Sharing of Intimate Images

Participants recounted how, at the time of other abuse experiences, their former or current partners showed their images to groups of friends on mobile phones or mobile apps, or posted them onto pornographic websites, social media sites, chat rooms, or imageboard sites without their consent, with others sometimes participating in the abuse. For instance, Alice (NZ) found out that her controlling boyfriend and two of his male friends were “pooling” her intimate images, alongside two other women’s images:

[My friend] found on her boyfriend's laptop pictures of me, her and another friend and she was also being taped in the shower. ... That's how I found out about it – through her, that they were, I guess, pooling these images ... which made me feel quite sick. ... I would say there would be at least 20 [photos] that I had taken but there would probably be maybe at least that many more that he'd taken. Maybe 40, I don't know, I didn't keep track.

Heather (UK) told us that after her ex-partner had repeatedly harassed and stalked her, and unsuccessfully attempted to resume the relationship, he messaged her one day with a link to a pornography site where he had uploaded sexual videos of her. Other participants described how their abusive partners had given their friends access to their intimate photos or videos on social media. For instance, Nicole (Aus) was in an “ongoing hook-up situation” with a man who had been abusive throughout their relationship. She said she did not know he had taken intimate images of her and only found about them after he had shared her images with a very large group of friends on social media.

Threats Made to Share Intimate Images

Finally, participants described how their current or former partners had threatened to share their nude or sexual images, with some then going on to carry out their threats. Zoe (UK), for example, told us how, when she was a teenager, her abusive boyfriend had taken intimate images of her without her consent, which he then used to threaten her into staying in a relationship with him:

He was quite abusive when we were together, so he was three years older and he was very controlling, and when I wanted the relationship to end, he didn't. So he tried to use [the images] as a bargaining tool to stop me from ending it ... 'He said 'if you get into another relationship, I'll send them around...'

Rachel (NZ) similarly described receiving threats from a former partner:

I was with this guy for about eight months and towards the end of the relationship ... I realised that... there was a lot of, sort of, warning flags, as well during our relationship. ... So I tried to end the relationship which is when he went very unstable and he made threats that he was going to send photos to my friends and family, upload them and everything like that ... in the end, he started threatening me and blackmailing me saying that he was going to do poster drops of naked photos of me around my workplace. ...

He was going to send videos to my work, to my parents, and my friends, and create a naked Instagram account of me, which really frightened me ... He said, ‘Come over now and we will talk about this, and if you have sex with me then I will give you the passcode to your naked Instagram account.’

Overall, victim-survivor experiences of image-based sexual abuse demonstrate the diverse ways in which abusive partners use non-consensual intimate images as a means of exerting coercion and control, alongside other abusive behaviors. This clearly shows that image-based sexual abuse is far more complex than the paradigmatic “revenge porn” scenario which is often presented in the news media (Henry et al., 2021). Indeed, while some participants did discuss some element of “retribution” (underpinned by the perpetrators’ sense of “entitlement” to “punish” survivors) as an apparent motivation for their former partners engaging in image-based sexual abuse, *power and control* had far more explanatory value, as we discuss in further detail below.

Image-Based Sexual Abuse as a Means of Power and Control

In our study, we asked participants to reflect on what they understood to be the key motivations for why their partners had taken, shared, or threatened to share, their nude or sexual images without their consent. Overall, participants suggested a wide variety of intersecting motivations for acts of image-based sexual abuse, such as control, sexual gratification, jealousy, boasting, attention-seeking, and as a means for punishment and humiliation. They described their abusive partners as “insecure,” “not nice,” “controlling,” “abusive,” “sadistic,” “belittling,” “insecure,” and “manipulative” (see also Henry et al., 2021; Pina, Holland, & James, 2017). For all 30 participants whose accounts we draw on in this article, intimate images were used by their current or former intimate partners as leverage to further enact power and control over them (see also Cuomo & Dolci, 2021; Eaton et al., 2020). It is useful, however, to explore further the overlapping but distinct components of coercive control exercised. In the

discussion below, we break down the analysis into three of the key elements of power and control as identified by Stark (2007): intimidation, entrapment, and degradation (see also Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019).

Intimidation

First, a key component of coercive control is intimidation, which involves a pattern of behavior that induces fear and anxiety in victims and in doing so, bolsters power and control. According to Stark (2009, p. 221), “These extend from threats, stalking, and the destruction of personal property through the myriad forms of manipulation and psychological abuse...”. In our study, participants described how their partners or ex-partners utilized a combination of different intimidation tactics, of which intimate images was a key part. For instance, Ali (NZ), who was the only gender diverse participant in our study, described their older partner being “very possessive ... not letting me go out anywhere without him.” He posted their intimate photos online to different sites, as well as sexually assaulted them, engaged in emotional abuse, and threatened to commit suicide when they attempted to break off the relationship – an experience also reported by others in our study. Ali said they were “scared of him” and as a consequence, opted to keep quiet about the sexual assault and the image-based sexual abuse because of “fear ... what’s going to happen next if you say anything.”

Ellen (Aus) similarly told us that she felt fearful for her safety owing to her partner’s threats:

He’d start getting really aggressive and emotional and then start saying some pretty hurtful stuff ... then he would block the door. Every time I tried to come towards the door he’d push me away, so I’d have to stay trapped in this room ... and yeah it was generally during those sorts of circumstances that he’d mention things about the photos, and he’d mention things about hurting himself.”

Ellen said it left her feeling “just really scared” and unsure what to do.

The omnipresent threat that a partner or ex-partner could, at any stage, without warning, share the intimate images to a person's friends, family, and community (see also McGlynn et al. 2021) is a significant means of intimidation. As noted earlier, many of the participants in our study described threats being made by abusive current or former partners to share nude or sexual images with others, with the effect of eliciting fear and anxiety. Heather (UK) mentioned that she when tried to the end the relationship with her abusive partner, he sent her a video he had taken, without her consent, of them having sex: "He sent me the clip through email and threatened to share that with everybody... I think he was trying as many ways as he could to get me back into the relationship... and it was to try to control me, I think, trying to rope me back in and control me." Another participant, Anna (UK), described her relationship with her partner who had been also physically and emotionally violent. She said her partner "got up and stuck a memory stick in the side of the TV ... and all these videos just ping, ping, ping up onto the screen, and he just looked at me as if to say, 'I've got these and just remember I have.'"

The effect of intimidation is to instil "fear, secrecy, dependence, compliance, loyalty, and shame" (Stark, 2009, p. 249). As recounted by the participants in our study, they were worried about what their partners or ex-partners might do if they ended the relationship or did not comply with their demands (see also Cuomo & Dolci, 2021).

Entrapment

Second, entrapment is a significant subjective experience of coercive control. The demands placed on women to comply with certain rules reduces their capacity for "effective resistance and escape," and as such, it also increases their risk of serious or fatal physical violence (Stark, 2009, p. 23). Entrapment can have immobilizing and isolating effects, leaving women feeling like they have little control over their lives. The entrapment can occur at different stages, including during the relationship as well as after it has ended. For instance, participants in our study described how intimate images were used to force them to stay in the

abusive relationship. Xia (NZ) described how the intimate images gave her controlling partner a “tighter hold” over her: “It was like ‘I’ve finally got control of you. I couldn’t quite keep a lid on it and keep a grip on you, but now I’ve got these [images] and I can keep a tighter grip.’” Zoe (UK) said that she was “extremely frightened” of her partner, and that he used the threat of sharing her images to keep her in the relationship, which led her to see him “as really powerful” and herself as “pretty much helpless.” Similarly, Sally (NZ) told us that when she tried to end the relationship, her partner threatened to put the videos of her that he had secretly taken onto “ex-girlfriend” websites. These threats overlaid other abusive behaviors that functioned to both psychologically and physically entrap her in the relationship.

Image-based sexual abuse also gives abusive former partners significant leverage after the relationship has ended. Rachel (NZ), for instance, said that after her relationship ended, she thought she was going to have to “just suck it up” and do whatever her ex-partner wanted her to do just so that he didn’t spread her images online and send them to her family and friends. Similarly, Amy (NZ) described how after they had broken up, her ex-partner sent her the photos as a “reminder” of his power and control over her. She said he was “absolutely malicious ... Just a conniving sort of person that just wants you to know that you’re always under their thumb.”

Moreover, as noted by Cuomo and Dolci (2021, p. 230), survivors are entrapped in abusive relationships because they “know that ongoing systemic sexism will position them as responsible for their abusers’ abuse.” Although our study did not specifically capture the experiences of migrant or refugee women, it is important to note the unique ways that intimate images can be used as a means of entrapment in abusive relationships in these contexts. In such circumstances, abusive partners threaten to share intimate images to the women’s family or community in their country of origin, and language, legal literacy, and migration status pose further obstacles that can contribute to significant entrapment for these women (see Henry et

al., 2021; see also Douglas et al. 2019). In other words, victim-survivors from Indigenous, migrant, or refugee backgrounds not only face systemic sexism, but also the structural inequalities of racism and colonialism which serve to further entrap them in abusive relationships.

Degradation

The third component of coercive control, as discussed by Stark (2009, p. 22), is degradation – a form of emotional abuse which “extends to multiple forms of shaming to establish the abusers’ moral superiority by denying dignity and self-respect to their partners.” This also contributes to feelings of entrapment and isolation. Most of the participants in this study highlighted the diverse ways in which image-based sexual abuse was being used by their partner as a tool of degradation. Sometimes this was in relation to non-consensually taken images being used deliberately as an insidious put-down. For example, Katherine (UK), whose husband had secretly recorded her coming out of the shower, getting undressed, and engaged in sexual acts, described a variety of ways that he would put her down and humiliate her:

For example, [if] I wore nail varnish, that meant that I was cheating on him with one of his friends. I had to apologise to him, and then he’d say, ‘well take off your top then.’ Or if I’m in the shower he would like rip the shower curtain open and say there’s no privacy between husband and wife ... he kept saying that I was boring and everything ... he’s calling me like a slut, a slag, a whore, and he needs to find a street corner for me. But then he’s taking images like that of me. And these are at times also where ... he’s taking images of [me] when I’m at my heaviest coming out of the shower and things.

Abusive male partners also tap into the sexual double standards that exist regarding women’s sexuality. Women described how their partners had secretly recorded them in their bedroom and bathrooms to be able to later make threats to share the images, or in fact share

images with friends and family members. They do so because they know that the dissemination of intimate images to family and friends will likely be a source of significant shame and humiliation. As Gemma (NZ) told us, her partner threatened to share photos of her on her Facebook timeline so her “whole family and all your friends can see who you are.” Frances (UK) said that her ex-partner wanted to humiliate her by sharing her intimate images with others: “He just had something over me, and I guess we had stopped being intimate and he just thought he was going to humiliate me and maybe try and get himself a bit of a reputation for being a ladies’ man.”

Using intimate images as a means of degradation was also connected to abusive partners’ sense of entitlement to enact “punishment” within the context of an ongoing abusive relationship, seemingly for resisting or evading their coercive control. For example, Rachel (NZ) described her former partner as a “sociopath” who blamed everyone else for things that went wrong in his life: “I was a bitch, [a] piece of shit who had led him on and broken his heart and ruined his life.” In explaining why he shared her intimate images without her consent, he told her ““I want you to feel as horrible as I feel. ... What you did to me, I want to do back to you. I want to make you feel the way that I am feeling right now. I want to ruin your life.”” Similarly, Sarah (UK) said her “obsessive” and “very, very angry” former partner committed image-based sexual abuse because he wanted to “punish” her for ending the relationship.

Through the words of the 30 participants we spoke to, our findings reveal the diverse and multiple ways in which abusive current or former partners weaponize intimate images as a powerful and insidious means of intimidation, entrapment, and degradation, as part of an overall pattern of gendered abuse. While this article does not discuss in detail the impacts of image-based sexual abuse on victim-survivors, these impacts are likewise both complex and diverse. As our participants expressed to us, they often felt trapped and in a constant state of fear and anxiety, and as such, vulnerable to ongoing abuse (see McGlynn et al 2020).

CONCLUSION

Abusive intimate partners (or former partners) use intimate imagery as a potent tool or tactic for exerting coercive control. Our interviews with women and one gender diverse person who had experienced partner-perpetrated image-based sexual abuse demonstrated a diversity of experiences well beyond the paradigm of “revenge porn.” A common theme across these interviews was the dynamic of coercive control, in which image-based sexual abuse was one of many abusive tactics employed (both technology- and non-technology-based) – used to isolate and entrap women within abusive relationships, or at the end of the relationship, to control, intimidate, punish, and degrade her. This is not a surprising finding given what is already known about the power and control dynamics of domestic violence, which feminist scholars have long argued reflects “the will to power,” embedded in, and against a backdrop of, broader societal patterns of gendered power inequality.

Although not all forms of image-based sexual abuse fit the profile of gender-based violence, our study has highlighted the need for health, legal, and educational practitioners to: (1) recognize some forms of image-based sexual abuse are part of a pattern of gendered violence (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; see also Henry et al., 2021) that take place alongside other forms of violence and abuse occurring in the context of coercive and controlling relationships; and (2) recognize that image-based sexual abuse can be a potent means of abuse in the context of such relationships.

The findings of this study have several practical implications. Attention to the problem of image-based sexual abuse within the domestic and sexual violence sector is important to ensure appropriate support, guidance, and advice is provided to victim-survivors. This should also include services providing accurate and practical advice on the applicability of laws and other justice options (e.g., civil law options or takedown requests from digital platforms); referrals to other key support organizations; greater resources and training for frontline staff;

the inclusion of strategies to circumvent or address image-based sexual abuse and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse within safety planning; and providing guidance and support on safety options and features of digital device usage. It is also important that structures are in place to facilitate organizations working together across different sectors to address this issue. Responses and interventions also need to be tailored to respond to the specific needs of diverse groups and should not be presented as a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

Owing to the demographic composition of our group of participants, we were unable to explore the intersections of gender with other social categories, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and class, and how they shaped the experiences of diversely situated victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse. This is an important avenue for future research, which could focus on specific groups who have experienced image-based sexual abuse at the intersections of misogyny with other axes of oppression.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the unique experiences of victim-survivors of partner-perpetrated image-based sexual abuse. It provides a representation of the ways in which digital technology is being used as a powerful and insidious weapon of coercive control. Law, policy, and educational responses must take account of these dynamics, to shape more effective responses and prevention interventions. This is crucial for not only supporting victim-survivors to navigate the often-complex justice, redress, and support options available to them, but also for informing prevention efforts at school and community levels, which should be designed to address power and control dynamics at the individual level, as well as the broader structural systems of gender inequality.

NOTES

[1] The Duluth Power and Control Wheel was a precursor to the concept of coercive control, which has been expanded upon in the influential work of Evan Stark (2017) to explain the pattern and effects of controlling behaviors in intimate relationships and to challenge the

misconception that domestic violence is primarily a form of physical abuse. The Duluth Power and Control Wheel was developed in 1984 by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP). It charts common abusive behaviors and tactics with a focus on power and control and the various patterns of behavior employed by abusive partners to threaten, intimidate, and coerce an intimate partner (Bohall, Bautista, & Musson, 2016; Pence & Paymar, 1993).

[2] Other scholars use the terms “non-consensual pornography” (Citron & Franks, 2014; Eaton, Noori, Bonomi, Stephens, & Gillum, 2020; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2019) or “revenge pornography” (Bates, 2017; Hall & Hearn, 2017). Both terms refer to the non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit images.

[3] The larger study involved a cross-country, multi-jurisdictional investigation of image-based sexual abuse. Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom were chosen as three key countries where significant legislative reform had been undertaken and were comparable owing to all sharing a common law tradition yet having different approaches to addressing image-based sexual abuse in law, policy, and practice.

[4] The broader qualitative study also involved 41 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders.

[5] For the remaining participants ($n = 17, 22.6\%$), the perpetrator was a friend, family member, colleague, acquaintance, or stranger.

[6] It is important to note that other participants may have also experienced intimate partner abuse but did not discuss this at the interview.

[7] Pākehā are New Zealanders of European descent.

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Table 1. Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Abuse.

Patterns	Description
Pressure to take or share intimate images	Partner has pressured the victim-survivor (e.g., pestered, demanded, nagged, insisted) to let them photograph or film them nude or engaged in a sexual act, or has pressured the victim-survivor to take and/or then share intimate images of themselves.
The non-consensual taking of intimate images	Partner has photographed or filmed the victim-survivor without their consent or knowledge. This can happen in either a public or private place while they are asleep or intoxicated without their clothes on, while they are engaged in a sexual act, while they are bathing, in a state of undress, or up their skirt/shorts, or down their top/blouse. It can also involve a partner taking photos or videos of a sexual assault – with or without the knowledge of the victim.
The non-consensual sharing of intimate images	Partner has shared, showed, posted, or distributed intimate images (photos or videos) of the victim-survivor without their consent. This may include showing another person the images on a phone or other device, or uploading images online to social media, pornography, or other sites, or sending them to others via message applications. The victim-survivor may not know that their images have been shared.
Threats made to share intimate images	Partner has threatened to share intimate images (photos or videos) of the victim-survivor. The threats may be <i>explicit</i> (e.g., communicated in-person, text, email, or online to force the victim to do something) or <i>implicit</i> (e.g., couched in a way that is implied). Abusive partners make threats to: demand more images; prevent the victim from leaving the relationship; inflict humiliation and control; demand monetary payment; or force the victim into unwanted sexual or other acts.

Table 2. Perpetration of Image-Based Sexual Abuse as a Means of Power and Control.

Tactics	Description
Intimidation	A pattern of threatening behavior that induces fear and anxiety in victims and, in doing so, may force them into or deter action, as well as bolster the perpetrator’s exertion of power and control.

Entrapment

Abusive behaviors and actions which place limitations on the actions of victims through use of fear and coercion (e.g., resulting in immobilization, isolation, and a reduced capacity to effectively resist, retaliate, or escape).

Degradation

A form of emotional and psychological abuse which debases and denies the dignity and self-respect of the victim, and can instil feelings of shame, humiliation, and low self-esteem.

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