Office of the
eSafety Commissioner

Australian Government

OCTOBER 2017

IMAGE-BASED ABUSE

NATIONAL SURVEY: SUMMARY REPORT

Research@eSafety

OFFICE OF THE ESAFETY COMMISSIONER

Introduction

Combatting image-based abuse is an important new role for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (the Office). In 2016-17, we had an estimated 400 complaints concerning image-based abuse. Through research and victim feedback, we have been working to develop a solid evidence base to inform our efforts to assist targets of this horrendous abuse.

Image-based abuse occurs when intimate or sexual photos or videos are shared online without consent. Perpetrators have a range of motives for distributing this material. This ranges from seeking to humiliate or shame someone, for the 'entertainment' of others, or to achieve status amongst online peers.

The term 'revenge porn' is often commonly used to describe this practice. However, the Office uses the term 'image-based abuse', because often this abuse is not about revenge, nor is it porn created for a broader audience. As leading scholars have pointed out, 'revenge porn' is a media-generated term that focuses on non-consensual sharing of nude or sexual images by ex-partners, for the purposes of revenge.[1] Not only does this term minimise what is a serious act of abuse, it deflects attention from other cases in which nude or sexual images are being shared online without consent. The term 'image-based abuse' better captures the diverse range of scenarios that are being reported to the Office.

Research commissioned by the Office sheds light on the diversity of contexts in which image-based is occurring. To inform its development of an online national complaints portal to combat image-based abuse, the Office commissioned a three-part research project comprising:

- a national survey of online Australians

- qualitative research with female victims and frontline workers

- a digital ethnographic study of online distribution channels.

This summary report is based on the key findings of the national survey, conducted in May 2017. Further information about the national survey, including methodology, is at the end of this summary report.

Key findings

The national survey found that image-based abuse affects a significant proportion of the Australian population. One in ten adult Australians have experienced their nude/sexual image being shared without consent, and almost one-fifth have been bystanders to image-based abuse. Certain segments of the Australian population are more likely to be targets of image-based abuse, including younger adults, women, Indigenous Australians and those who identify as LGBTI. For example, one in five women aged 18-45 have experienced their nude/sexual image being shared without consent.

There is a diversity of victims of image-based abuse, and a variety of relationships between victim and perpetrator. In many cases, perpetrators were friends of the victim; the research shows that abuse is also being inflicted by those other than ex-partners, contrary to common understanding of 'revenge porn'.

This research indicates that both men and women are victims (and perpetrators) of image-based abuse. However, the research also reveals significant differences in men's and women's experiences of image-based abuse. These differences are:

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[1] Henry, N, Powell, A & Flynn, A. (2017) *Not Just 'Revenge Pornography': Australians' Experiences of Image-Based Abuse.* A Summary Report. Melbourne: RMIT University.

- Women are twice as likely to have their nude/sexual images shared without consent than men.

- Women are more likely to experience image-based abuse at the hands of a former intimate partner than men.

- Women are considerably more likely to report negative personal impacts as a result of image-based abuse.

- Experiences of stalking or threatening behaviour are higher amongst women than men, especially amongst young women aged 18-34 years.

Mainstream social media services feature prominently as channels for non-consensual distribution of nude/sexual images. This makes sense when the intent is to cause humiliation as friends, family and work colleagues are more likely to see such images on popular social media sites. This indicates the importance of working collaboratively with social media platforms and website providers to proactively respond to and address image-based abuse. The Office will continue to facilitate solutions with stakeholders in social media and the technology industry to combat image-based abuse, building on its pre-existing role operating a cyberbullying complaints scheme for Australian children.

The national survey shows that most Australians recognise the harms of image-based abuse. While this is encouraging, the survey also found that victim-blaming attitudes persist and few bystanders take action when they witness abuse. This suggests that there needs to be cultural change and greater education relating to the issue of image-based abuse.

The findings indicate the importance of providing information and support for a diverse range of victims affected by image-based abuse, and of ensuring that this accounts for the different contexts in which image-based abuse is being perpetrated. The research suggests that there is much room for increasing access to, and raising awareness about, pathways and available sources of information and support. The Office's online portal aims to help fill this gap, by providing tangible support to the broad spectrum of Australians who experience image-based abuse.

How common is image-based abuse?

Image-based abuse is more prevalent, and affects a wider range of Australians, than is commonly understood.

1 in 10 Australians have experienced image-based abuse

Amongst online adult Australians, 11% have had a nude or sexual photo/video posted online or sent on without their consent. For the majority of victims (54%), the most recent experience of image-based abuse occurred more than one year ago. One-fifth (19%) said it occurred in the past year, while one in ten (12%) said it occurred in the past month.

The 1 in 10 figure differs to earlier research by RMIT which reported that one in five Australians surveyed have experienced image-based abuse.[2] This is because the RMIT survey was broader, measuring not only the distribution of image-based abuse material, but also images taken without consent and the threat to distribute. The Office's survey focused only on measuring images distributed without consent. Another difference is the RMIT survey used a younger sample of respondents: Australians aged 16 to 49. The Office's survey included older respondents, with an age range of 15 to 76 plus.

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[2] Henry, N, Powell, A & Flynn, A. (2017) *Not Just 'Revenge Pornography': Australians' Experiences of Image-Based Abuse.* A Summary Report. Melbourne: RMIT University.

Women and younger adults are more likely to have experienced image-based abuse

The prevalence of image-based abuse is higher amongst women and younger adults.

Women aged 18 and over (15%) are twice as likely as men aged 18 and over to have experienced image-based abuse (7%). The largest difference in prevalence between women and men can be seen amongst young adults aged 18-24, with 24% of women and 16% of men aged 18-24 having experienced image-based abuse (see Figure 1). Of young women aged 15 to 17, 15% had experienced image-based abuse.

The proportion who have experienced image-based abuse substantially decreases with age amongst women and men. One-fifth (20%) of women aged 18-45 experienced image-based abuse compared with 4% of women aged 46 and over. For men, 16% of those aged 18-45 experienced image-based abuse compared with 4% of men aged 46 and over.

Figure 1: Prevalence of image-based abuse by age and gender, May 2017
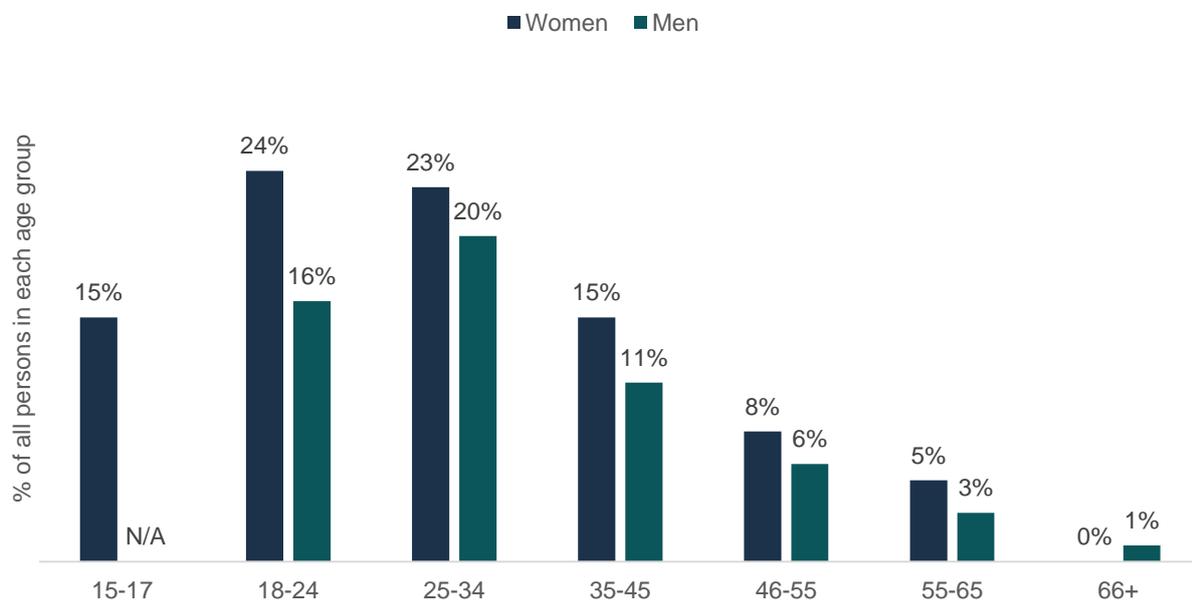
Image-based abuse is most prevalent amongst minority groups including Indigenous Australians and those who identify as LGBTI

In addition to gender and age, the research shows that the prevalence of image-based abuse varies by a range of other socio-demographic factors across the Australian population.

Indigenous Australians are twice as likely to have experienced image-based abuse in comparison with non-Indigenous Australians. A quarter of those who identify as Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander (25%) have experienced image-based abuse, compared with 11% of those who don't identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Almost a fifth of those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (19% vs. 11% heterosexual) have experienced image-based abuse. Almost a fifth of those who speak a language other than English at home (19% vs. 11% English only) have experienced image-abuse. Those who have completed a university degree (15% vs 10% without a degree) are also more likely to have experienced image-based abuse.

1 in 2 of those who felt pressured into taking nude selfies have experienced image-based abuse

Image-based abuse is more common amongst those who had, in the past year, felt pressured into taking sexual self-images (47%) and those who had consensually engaged in sexual self-image taking (33%) as compared to those who had not.

However, even those who have not taken nude selfies in the past 12 months have experienced image-based abuse. While less common, one in ten (9%) of those who had not taken a sexual self-image in the past year had nevertheless experienced image-based abuse.

How is image-based abuse occurring?

Perpetrators of image-based abuse are typically someone victims know

Sixty-three percent of online adults who had experienced image-based abuse said that someone close to them had distributed the photo/video without their consent. They said the perpetrator was a friend that they knew offline (29%), an ex-partner (13%), current partner (12%) or family member (10%).

Figure 2: Relationship to the person who shared the photo/video, May 2017

% of those who experienced image-based abuse
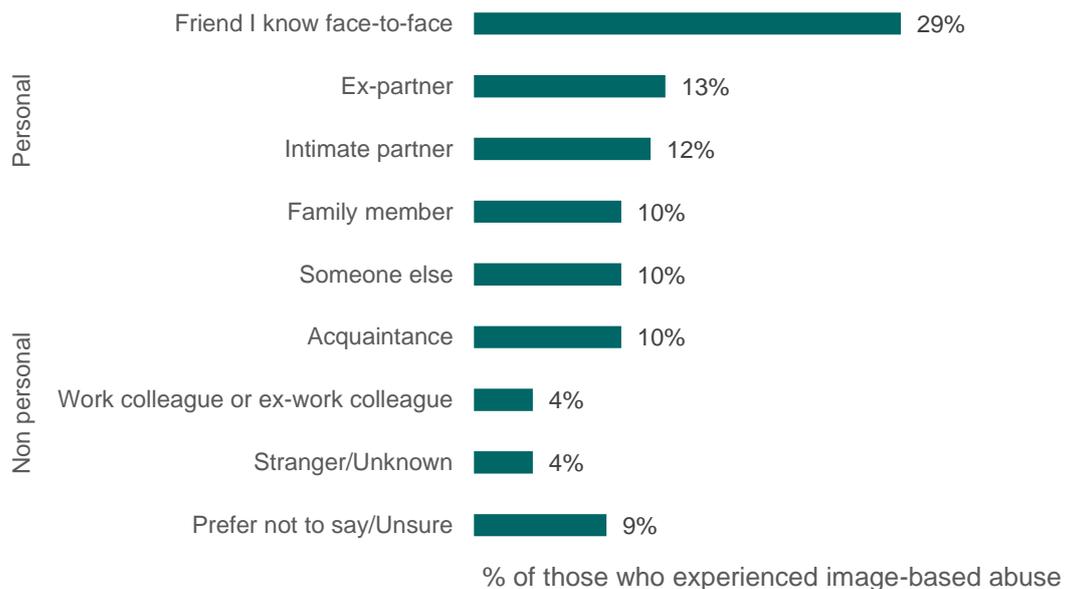
The majority (62%) of online adults who had experienced image-based abuse indicated the same person who had shared the photo/video had also taken it.

Results indicated that, in general, women are more likely than men to say they have experienced image-based abuse victimisation from a former intimate partner, but less likely to have experienced this from a family member.

1 in 4 victims of image-based abuse have been stalked or threatened by the perpetrator—this is higher amongst female victims

The most recent experience of image-base abuse had typically been a one-off action by the perpetrator (68%). However, for 14% of victims, it had occurred more than once, while around one in four (27%) reported the perpetrator had engaged in stalking or threatening behaviour after the photos/videos were shared. The research shows that these experiences are more common amongst women. Experiences of stalking or threatening behaviour are higher amongst adult women than men, and especially amongst women aged 18-34 years (39%).

The variety of contexts in which image-based abuse can occur is also explored in the qualitative research with female victims and frontline workers commissioned by the Office. This identifies four main typologies of image-based abuse, with some overlap between them:

1. Sharing of images amongst young people, typically amongst school-aged peers and within friendship circles.
2. Sharing of images by an ex-partner for revenge, or by current partner to boast and gain social status.
3. Sharing of images as part of sexual or domestic violence, as another way perpetrators attempted to coerce or control the victim.
4. Sharing of images for exploitation and extortion.

Perpetrators tend to be male, although for a third of victims the perpetrator was female

The gender of the person who shared the photo/video tends to be male (49%), although one-third (35%) had been shared by females. The remainder were unsure of the gender or preferred not to respond to the question.

For women victims of image-based base, the gender of the perpetrator varies by their relationship to the victim. Reflective that the majority (86%) of women identified as heterosexual, the majority said the perpetrator was male when the photo/video had been shared by an ex-partner (86%) or current partner (83%). Conversely, when a photo/video was shared by a friend (72%) or family member (66%), the majority said the perpetrator was female. Sample sizes were too small for men to conduct similar analysis.

Facebook is the most common online distribution channel for non-consensual nude/sexual images among online adults

Amongst online adults who experienced image-based abuse, the most common channel through which the photos/videos were distributed was a Facebook service (53%)—either Facebook directly (47%) or Messenger (10%). This was followed by SMS/multimedia messaging service (MMS) (30%), Snapchat (11%) and email (11%). Few victims said that their photos/videos were posted or shared via pornography websites (3%) or revenge porn websites (2%).

More mature-aged women, 18 and over, were more likely than men to indicate the photos/videos had been shared via SMS/MMS (36%), but less likely to report the photo/video had been shared via Facebook (42%).

Figure 3: Channel via which the photo/video was shared, May 2017

% of those who experienced image-based abuse
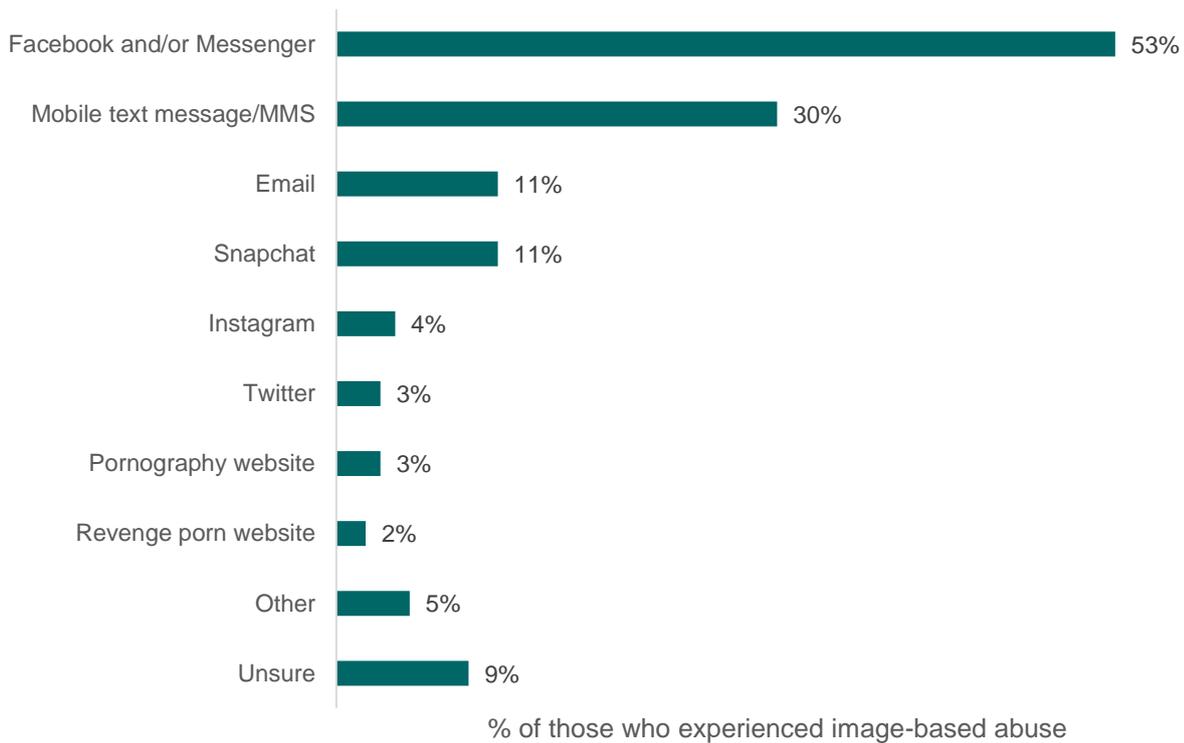
Channel used to share photos/ videos varies by age, with Snapchat mentioned by almost a third of 18-24 year old victims and almost half of 15-17 year old female victims

The channel via which the photos/videos was shared varies by age. Email was more likely to be mentioned by those aged 25-55 (13%) than by younger adults. Snapchat was more likely to be mentioned by young adults aged 18-24 years (27%), especially teenaged girls between 15 and 17 (47%).[3]

In the qualitative research, respondents said that the main channels used by school-aged young people to share images were:

- messaging services, such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp
- MMS messages
- uploading to social media sites, mainly Facebook and Instagram, and
- image sharing phone apps, for instance, Snapchat.

This research found that current or ex-partners shared images in different ways to young people, including:

- showing others directly from a device (e.g. mobile phone, computer)
- MMS messages

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[3] Results relating to women aged 15-17 should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes. A total of 34 young women aged 15-17 had experienced image-based abuse.

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- sharing on social media
- creating fake online dating and social media accounts
- prostitution websites.

Victims may not be aware their images were distributed on other sites

It is important to note that victims can only report on instances where they have become aware that images have been distributed. There are less visible channels, as examined in the digital ethnographic study of online distribution channels commissioned by the Office.[4] This study found that online distribution channels for image-based abuse material fall under two broad categories:

- Public shaming sites—Highly visible sites, such as social media platforms, or less visible but nonetheless public sites such as 'revenge porn' specific or ex-girlfriend/ex-wife sites, where the purpose of sharing the image appears to be the humiliation, shaming and/or embarrassment of the victim.
- Private sharing sites—Sites where images are shared in secret or less visible ways via a range of image-boards, online forums, and less visible online communities where the motivation for sharing the image is for sexual gratification purposes and/or the desire to build social status amongst online peers.

Private sharing sites are the types of sites or platforms where victims are less likely to become aware that their images have been distributed. The digital ethnographic study examined one of the most active of these sites, a user-generated porn site with an online community of those who want to view and share non-consensual, amateur images. The study shows that such sites may host thousands of photos and videos likely to be non-consensual. For example, a search on 'revenge' within that site came up with 12,460 images, 11,211 videos, 91 galleries, 15 groups and 168 board posts. As this example shows, private sharing sites can operate as distribution channels for possible image-based abuse material. Such sites may be under-reported in victim surveys.

Types of photos or videos circulated

In relation to the most recent experience of image-based abuse, the most common forms of image-based abuse among women aged 18 and over tend to be photos or videos of their cleavage (20%) or where they were partially clothed or semi-nude in the photo/video (17%). The most common forms of image-based abuse amongst men aged 18 and over are where they were partially clothed or semi-nude in the photo/video (30%).

Other forms of image-based abuse are less frequently mentioned and over a third of victims (35%) said they were unsure of the nature of the photo or video that was shared (Figure 4). This may relate to instances where victims have not seen or received the photo/video themselves. In the qualitative research commissioned by the Office, it was common for victims to find out about the image-based abuse from bystanders: concerned friends or acquaintances who had heard of or seen the images circulated by the perpetrator or a third party.
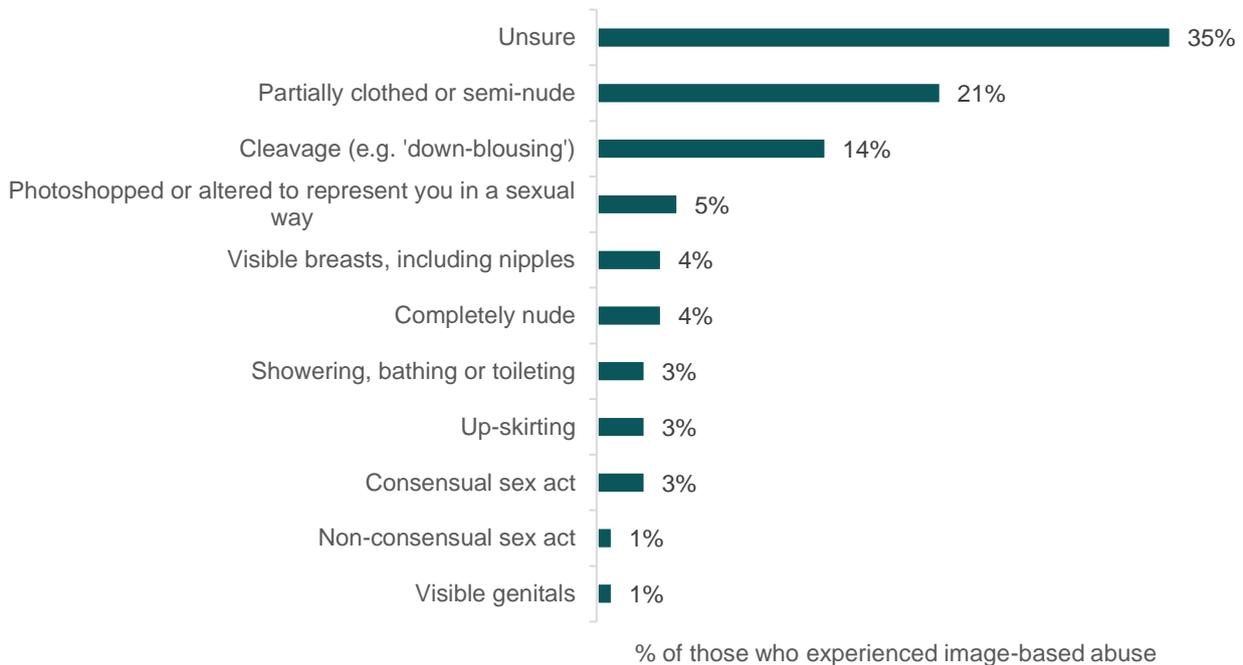
The research measures victims' overall experiences of image-based abuse, as well as examining victims' most recent experience of image-based abuse. The nature of the most recent experience of image-based abuse largely followed patterns relating to experiences overall, although the numbers relating to experiences overall are naturally higher given that multiple experiences could be recounted by victims. Regarding

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[4] Henry, N, Powell, A, Rees, T, Pfitzner, N & Flynn, A (2017) *Image-based abuse in Australia: Sites of Distribution.* (Unpublished) Report prepared for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner. Melbourne: RMIT University.

experiences overall, one in ten women (11%) who experienced image-based abuse said that the type of photo/video involved was a photo or video of them in a non-consensual sex act.

Figure 4: Type of photo/video most recently shared, May 2017

Type	%
Unsure	35%
Partially clothed or semi-nude	21%
Cleavage (e.g. 'down-blousing')	14%
Photoshopped or altered to represent you in a sexual way	5%
Visible breasts, including nipples	4%
Completely nude	4%
Showering, bathing or toileting	3%
Up-skirting	3%
Consensual sex act	3%
Non-consensual sex act	1%
Visible genitals	1%

% of those who experienced image-based abuse

1 in 2 victims were recognisable in the photo/video shared, and many had personal information shared alongside the photo/video

The level of personal identification in shared photos or videos was high amongst online adults who had experienced image-based abuse. Half (50%) thought they would be recognisable to others in the photo/video that was distributed.

Further, one-third (33%) indicated their name had been shared alongside the photo/video and one-fifth (21%) that their social network information/profile had also been shared. One-third (35%) were unsure of what information had also been shared. As discussed earlier above, this may be because they had not seen the photo/video in the environment it had been shared.

Victims reported negative impacts on their mental and physical wellbeing and on various aspects of their lives as a result of the abuse

The impact of image-based abuse amongst online adults was overwhelming negative. Women were considerably more likely to report negative personal impacts as a result of image-based abuse, in terms of their emotional response, fear of discovery and impact on life.

Overall, two-thirds of online adults who experienced image-based abuse indicated they had felt annoyed (65%) or angry (64%) with the person who had perpetrated the abuse, while 55% felt humiliated and 40% depressed. Thirty-two percent had felt afraid for their safety. Online adults most feared the discovery of the photos/videos by their friends (51%) and family (48%), although many also feared discovery by an employer (41%), intimate partner (40%) and children (39%).

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The most common negative impacts of the most recent experience of image-based abuse related to self-esteem (42%) and mental health (41%). One-third said it had impacted their physical wellbeing (33%) and relationships with friends (33%), while one-quarter said it had impacted their intimate/sexual relationships (28%), relationships with family (27%) and performance at work or study (28%).

Actions taken by victims

1 in 4 victims took action in response to the abuse

Taking action in response to experiences of image-based abuse was low amongst online adults, with 24% saying they had taken some form of action in response to their most recent experience. The main barriers for not taking action related to beliefs that taking action would not change anything (29%), lack of knowledge on what to do (22%) and feeling embarrassed (18%).

Figure 5: Barriers to taking action, May 2017

Barrier	%
Felt that it wouldn't change anything	29%
No reason	26%
Didn't know what to do	22%
Felt embarrassment	18%
Not affected by image being shared	11%
Felt shame	11%
Was worried what would happen once took action	10%
Feared for safety if the person who shared it found out	5%
Other reasons	5%
Unsure	3%

% of those who experienced image-based abuse

Actions taken

When action was taken by those who had experienced image-based abuse, most (87%) said it had resolved the problem. Typical actions included confronting the perpetrator (47%) and reporting the abuse (35%). One-fifth had withdrawn from social activities (20%), talked to a friend or family about the experience (17%) or sought advice or information (17%). One in ten (9%) had made major changes to their life, such as changing job or school, or moving house.

Figure 6: Actions taken in relation to most recent experience of image-based abuse, May 2017

% of those who experienced image-based abuse
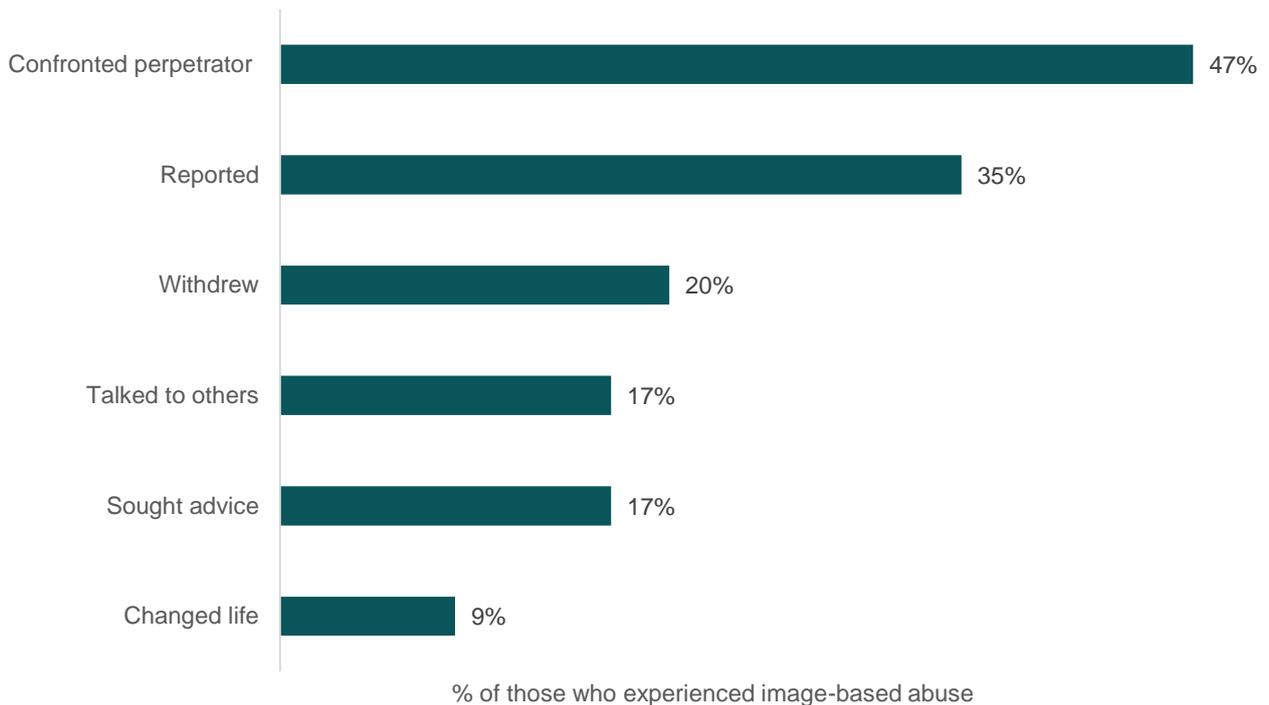
For those who took action in response to experiencing image-based abuse, the types of information or advice that would have been most helpful at the time included information on how to have an image removed (31%), examples or stories about others' experiences (28%) and information on relevant laws (26%). One-fifth indicated information on how to report it (22%), how to manage the impact of it (20%), facts and figures about how often image-based abuse happens (19%) and how to handle it by oneself (20%) would be helpful, while online counselling (14%) was seen as the least helpful.

There is low awareness of sources of support and information

General awareness of information, help or support for image-based abuse is low amongst online adults, with one-fifth (22%) knowing where to seek information, help or support. Of those who said they knew where to go, the most commonly identified sources were the police (71%), Australian Cybercrime Online Reporting Network (ACORN) (46%) and support services, such as counsellors, helplines or health practitioners (36%), followed by online searches (27%). The Office was identified by one-fifth (23%) of those with awareness of sources of support and information.

The most frequently mentioned types of information or advice that online adults thought would be helpful to someone experiencing image based abuse are: information on how to get the image removed (72%), how to report it (68%) and laws relating to the sharing of nude or sexual images (62%).

Figure 7: Where would you go for information/support, May 2017
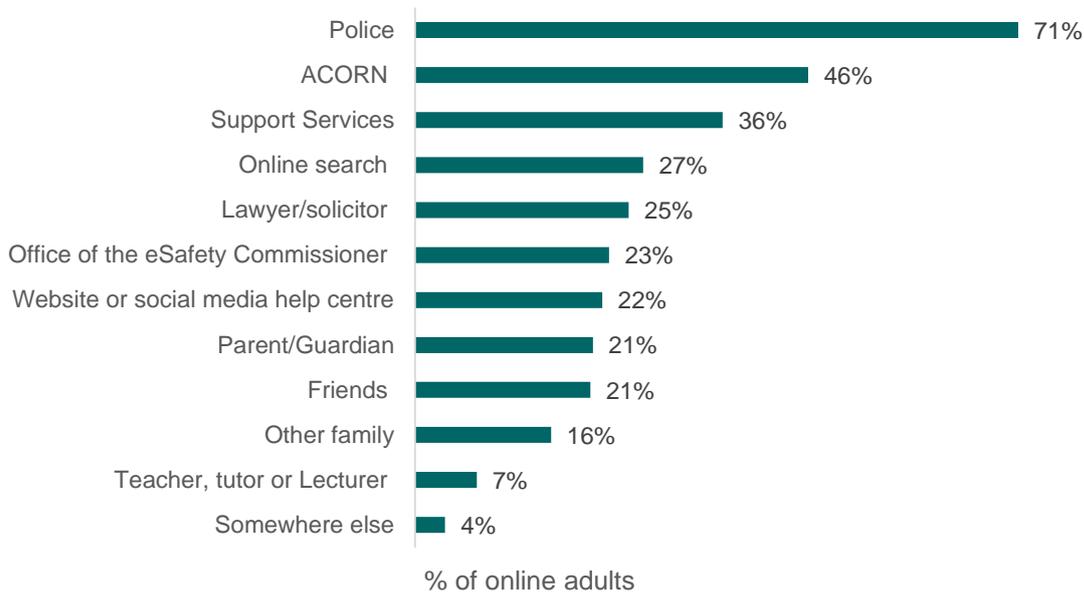
Most online adults said they would be comfortable reporting image-based abuse to a relevant authority (60%) or seeking information or advice from a relevant organisation (54%). Reasons for why they felt comfortable or uncomfortable seeking information or advice varied substantially by level of comfort. Desiring justice or action and trust in authorities to do the right thing were the most common reasons for feeling more comfortable with seeking information or advice. Feeling embarrassed or finding it difficult to talk about the experience, or being unsure why, were the most common reasons for feeling less comfortable.

Community attitudes to image-based abuse

Although most Australians recognise the harms caused by image-based abuse, the majority still hold victim-blaming attitudes

The survey measured attitudes to image-based abuse by asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with various statements about taking and sharing of nude or sexual photos/videos. Some of these statements were about minimising the harms of image-based abuse. For example, respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement that 'women tend to exaggerate how much it affects them if a nude or sexual photo/video of them gets out online'. Other statements were about blaming the victim for the abuse; see examples below.[5]

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[5] These statements form part of the Sexual Image-based Abuse Myth Acceptance (SIAMA) Scale developed by Powell, Henry and Flynn (forthcoming, 2017) in Development and Preliminary Validation of the Sexual Image-based Abuse Myth Acceptance (SIAMA) Scale, Sage Open.

The survey found that less than one in ten online adults agree with most statements about minimising the harms of image-based abuse. However, statements about blaming the victim were much more likely to be supported. For example:

- 67% of online adults agree that 'people should know better than to take nude selfies in the first place, even if they never send them to anyone'.

- 57% agree that 'a person who sends a nude or sexual photo/video to someone else is at least partly responsible if it ends up online'.

- 52% agree that 'if a man sends a nude or sexual photo/video to someone he just met, he should not be surprised if it ends up online.'

These results show that although most online adults recognise the harms of image-based abuse, many hold attitudes that blame the victims for image-based abuse they have experienced.
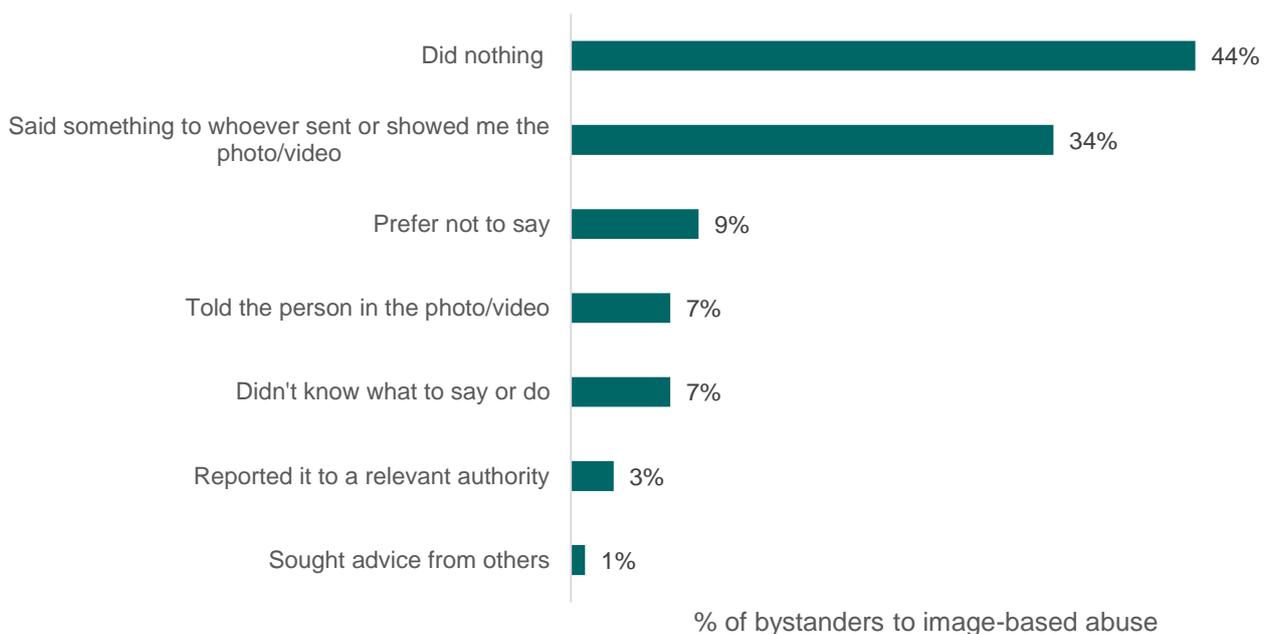
Bystander experiences and attitudes

Almost 1 in 5 online adult Australians were bystanders to image-based abuse, with 4 in 10 taking no action in response

Overall, 19% of online adults indicated they have received a nude or sexual photo/video from someone else that they thought was likely to be a form of image-based abuse (they knew there was no consent or were unsure).

The most common emotional reaction was feeling uncomfortable about being shown or sent the photo/video (40%). Less than one in five said they felt emotions such as anger (17%), annoyance (16%) or embarrassment (15%). Further, behavioural responses to exposure were split between having taken action and taking no action. Slightly less than half did not do or say anything (44%), while one-third (34%) indicated they said something to the person who showed them the photo/video.

Figure 8: Bystander actions taken in response to receiving material likely to be image-base abuse, May 2017

% of bystanders to image-based abuse

Action	%
Did nothing	44%
Said something to whoever sent or showed me the photo/video	34%
Prefer not to say	9%
Told the person in the photo/video	7%
Didn't know what to say or do	7%
Reported it to a relevant authority	3%
Sought advice from others	1%

About the research

In 2017, the Office initiated a mixed-methods research project to inform the development of a national online portal to help victims of image-based abuse. This research was comprised of three elements:

- a national survey of online Australians
- qualitative research with female victims and frontline workers
- a digital ethnographic study of online distribution channels.

This report provides a summary of key findings of the national survey. The full report will be released in 2017.

Research objectives and methodology

The Office commissioned the Social Research Centre, in conjunction with leading academic experts from RMIT University, to undertake the national survey.

The objective of the survey was to measure the prevalence, nature and impacts of image-based abuse amongst Australian women aged 15-45 years who use the internet. The scope of the survey was expanded to include women aged 46+ and adult males, and to examine broader community attitudes and responses to image-based abuse. The expanded scope enables this research to provide the first nationally representative indication of the prevalence and nature of image-based abuse amongst online adult Australians.

The survey was conducted 8-21 May 2017. The total sample was 4,122. This comprised 2,417 women aged 15-45, 1,505 women aged 46+ and adult males, and a boost sample of 200 women aged 15-45 who had experienced image-base abuse. Respondents were surveyed using an online self-completion questionnaire. They were recruited via two sample frames – the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia probability-based online panel and a non-probability online panel.

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This research on image-based abuse forms part of the Office's broader research program. An overview of the current research program and findings from other research projects are available on the Office website.

Under Section 15 of the *Enhancing Online Safety for Australians Act 2015*, the Office has the following functions relating to research:

- to support, encourage, conduct and evaluate research about online safety for Australians
- to collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to online safety for Australians
- to publish reports and papers relating to online safety for Australians.

For any enquiries about research, please contact research@esafety.gov.au.

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