OCTOBER 2017

IMAGE-BASED ABUSE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research@eSafety

OFFICE OF THE ESAFETY COMMISSIONER

Introduction

Digital technologies are increasingly being used by perpetrators as tools of abuse, harassment and violence. 'Image-based abuse', known colloquially as 'revenge porn', reflects this trend. Broadly, it refers to the non-consensual taking, distribution, or threat of distribution, of intimate, nude and/or sexual images. Image-based abuse has become a growing issue for several reasons, including the ease with which intimate, nude or sexual images (including both videos and photographs) can be created, uploaded and downloaded; the difficulties associated with removing these images once they are online; and the variety of platforms that popularise and support the trade and consumption of non-consensual images.[1]

In 2017 the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (the Office) commissioned a three-part research project to better understand the experiences of image-based abuse among Australian women. This research was commissioned to inform the development of a national online portal to help counter the effects of sharing intimate material without consent. It comprises:

- 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 findings of the qualitative research, which involved 38 in-depth interviews with female victims aged 18 to 44 and relevant frontline workers. A further 10 victims participated in an online discussion board. The frontline workers, referred to as 'stakeholders' in this report, worked in domestic violence services, legal services, eSafety training services, sexual assault services, young women's services/programs, migrant organisations, or in schools.

The findings presented in this report explore a range of different views, attitudes and experiences of image-based abuse from the perspectives of victims and stakeholders. Material, summarised views, standards or recommendations of third parties, which are included in this report, solely reflect the views of parties interviewed.

The full qualitative report will be released by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner later in 2017.

Key findings

The key findings of this research exploring victim's experiences and their responses shows that:

- The term 'image-based abuse' more accurately reflects the full range of experiences women face with this type of abuse than the term 'revenge porn'. This is because there is a diversity of circumstances in which images are shared without consent in addition to the scenario of the 'jilted ex' seeking revenge on a former partner.

- Specifically, image-based abuse is most prominent in four main contexts, with some overlap between them: as a result of distribution amongst a young persons' peer group; by a current or former partner; as part of sexual or domestic violence; or because they have been subjected to sexploitation or sextortion.

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[1] Powell, A., Henry, N. & Flynn, A. (2017a, in press). 'Image-based Sexual Abuse'. In DeKeseredy, W. S., & Dragiewicz, M. (Eds.). *Handbook of critical criminology.* Routledge.

- Victims felt a range of negative emotions when they became aware that their private images had been shared without their consent. They avoided seeking redress because of the stigma attached to image-based abuse, unclear avenues for seeking help and fear of exacerbating the situation.

- When victims did turn to others for help, it was often to friends, family, mental health services and/or school support staff. Help was also sought from police, especially if the image-based abuse was an aspect of domestic violence.

- Victims felt that the most helpful response from family and friends was in offering support, empathy and reassurance that they were not at fault, rather than guidance on what to do next.

- Some victims confronted the perpetrators. A few also sought cooperation from online hosts to take down images with limited success.

The research found that there is a widespread lack of information and resources to support victims of image-based abuse, and a lack of awareness of where to access them. Victims and stakeholders also made a range of suggestions on how to prevent image-based abuse and ways of supporting victims when it occurs. These included:

- Educating young people in schools to raise awareness, discuss consequences and enact change. This included education about cyber safety and image-based abuse throughout the school years.

- Greater education of the general public to change victim-blaming attitudes.

- The need for greater responsiveness from online hosts and social media platforms in removing photos or videos shared without consent. Respondents felt that online hosts and social media providers needed to take more responsibility in responding to image-based abuse and ensuring that further circulation was prevented.

- Suggestions on the types of resources and information that should be made available on the Office's portal to support victims.

These research findings are valuable in providing a strong evidence base for the development of the Office's online portal to combat image-based abuse, informing the structure of the portal, the type of resources and information needed by victims and the range of circumstances that it should cover, ensuring that the Office can best assist victims of image-based abuse through our portal.

Language and terminology

The research explored the language and terminology used by victims, stakeholders and the general public when discussing image-based abuse. It found that 'image-based abuse' was not a familiar term for most respondents. Many agreed that it was a comprehensive description of the type of abuse experienced by women and that it was more encompassing than the frequently used term 'revenge porn'; however, respondents mentioned that it sounded academic. Some suggestions included using the term 'technology' for example 'technology-facilitated image abuse', 'non-consensual sharing of images', or 'intimate image abuse'.

Despite the term 'victim' being commonly used for people who had been subjected to image-based abuse, some respondents were cautious in using this as saw it as a loaded term. Victims mentioned that they would not have identified as a 'victim' of image-based abuse at the time it was happening, but were more inclined to identify as such when reflecting on the abuse.

Image-based abuse—typologies

The research identified four main typologies of image-based abuse—with some overlap between them:

Sharing of images among young people

> *They had a Facebook group chat and there was about eight of them in that swimming team and then it just went between like…all their different friendship groups, it spread pretty quickly. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 15)*

The sharing of images amongst young people was reported as common among school-aged peers and within friendship circles, occurring to intentionally humiliate the person, or as a joke or 'game' amongst friends. For many of the school-aged victims, the image-based abuse occurred when a relationship was casual, or in the early stages. In contrast, stakeholders generally described image-based abuse occurring when the two young people were in a current or former established relationship. Sharing intimate images was perceived as becoming increasingly prevalent and normalised behaviour by young people, with discussions highlighting increased pressure for young women to conform to requests of intimate images.

The main platforms identified by respondents to distribute these images were Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat as well as through multimedia messaging service (MMS) messages. Snapchat was an app frequently mentioned by respondents as a tool to send intimate images.

Sharing images by a partner or ex-partner

> *He used the photos and created profile actual characters of me on websites, and telling people that I was up for sex straight away, and to come to my house. And so, I had callers every half an hour, knocking on my door at home, throughout the night. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 3)*

Ex-partner retribution was raised by respondents, with a range of motivations behind perpetrators seeking to enact revenge on their previous partner. These included an acrimonious break-up, a new relationship and custody issues. Image-based abuse by current partners was also reported where a partner had shared images to boast about the image they had acquired and to gain social status amongst their friends.

Current or ex-partners used different channels to distribute images than school-aged young people. Like young people, they used social media and MMS messages to share images. However, in contrast, they also shared images by showing others directly from a device and by establishing fake accounts on dating, prostitution and social media sites.

Sharing of images as part of sexual or domestic violence

> *For a long time, I was sort of having to succumb to [emotional, physical, financial and sexual abuse], I guess. …. When I decided that it was no longer going to become physical anymore, in terms of our relationship, that I'd had enough, he produced an image that he'd shot on his iPhone of him and I having sex, and told me that he would ruin my life. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 12)*

Respondents, particularly stakeholders, frequently mentioned that image-based abuse was often part of domestic and sexual violence in a relationship, as a way to exert power and control over the victim. They also identified that image-based abuse has similar characteristics to domestic violence and that perpetrators employ similar strategies to exert control and dominance in order to make victims fear for their safety and wellbeing.

In the context of sexual assault, respondents spoke of situations where victims were threatened with the distribution of images that were often taken following an act of sexual violence or assault.

Sharing of images for exploitation or extortion—'sexploitation' or 'sextortion'

> *Oftentimes when we see the sharing of images, there has—not in every case but in a lot of cases —there's been a sexual assault. We'd be looking at whether it's a case of human trafficking, we'd be looking at cases that're—she was working in the sex industry, whether he was her pimp. (Stakeholder, domestic violence service, in-depth interview no. 6)*

Stakeholders discussed instances of exploitation and extortion in relation to:

- migrant women being forced into situations where intimate images had been taken without consent and subsequently used as a source of power and control over them to continue to force them to perform sexual acts against their will;

- 'revenge porn' websites where the online hosts encouraged people to upload intimate images for commercial gain; and

- using images to manipulate women for sex.

Other image-based abuse circumstances

Respondents also identified other image-based abuse circumstances including perpetrators covertly taking images without consent (for example, 'upskirting' or when the victim was in the shower), exploiting cultural and religious beliefs with threats to humiliate through imagery, altering images using software such as Photoshop and 'predators' targeting people online through chat functions, online video streaming and online gaming rooms.

Reactions of victims and bystanders

Victim's reactions

> *My first reaction was mortified anger. If I had a knife at the time I found out and he was nearby, I have no doubt I'd be in jail. (Female victim, online discussion board no. 1)*

Upon learning they were the subject of image-based abuse, all victims experienced negative emotions. As Figure 1 shows, the most common emotions included anger, embarrassment, and feeling mortified and ashamed.

Figure 1   Initial reactions of victims


Bystander reactions

> *And then this boy in my year—so he was a year younger—came up to me and just looked at me really funny and called me a slut in the canteen line. I was like, 'Okay, like what was that about?' And then all of these people started coming up to me, asking me, like, 'Why would you do that?' (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 17)*

While bystanders were not consulted in this research, different bystander reactions to and involvement in image-based abuse emerged when talking with victims and stakeholders. In many instances, victims reported finding out about the image-based abuse from bystanders. Some victims had learnt of the image-based abuse from concerned friends or acquaintances, whilst others had become aware of the incident because of bystander behaviours, for example, they were subjected to derogatory remarks from classmates or were receiving comments from acquaintances who had seen the images.

Barriers to action

> *Because again, it's like it's dirty. It's like you've done something really dirty, and no one's allowed to know about it. And as a result, you feel like you just can't talk about it to anyone. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 3)*

Most women who participated in this research had not taken formal action in seeking help and support from professional services, for example, the police, support services or legal advice, after an image of them had been shared without consent. The most common barriers that prevented victims from reporting the abuse or seeking support were the negative stigma associated with image-based abuse, being unclear about where to go for help, and fear of exacerbating the situation. Other barriers included psychological and emotional barriers, not recognising that it was an offence and concerns about mandatory reporting. Figure 2 depicts the common barriers that victims have in taking action.

Figure 2   Barriers to taking action
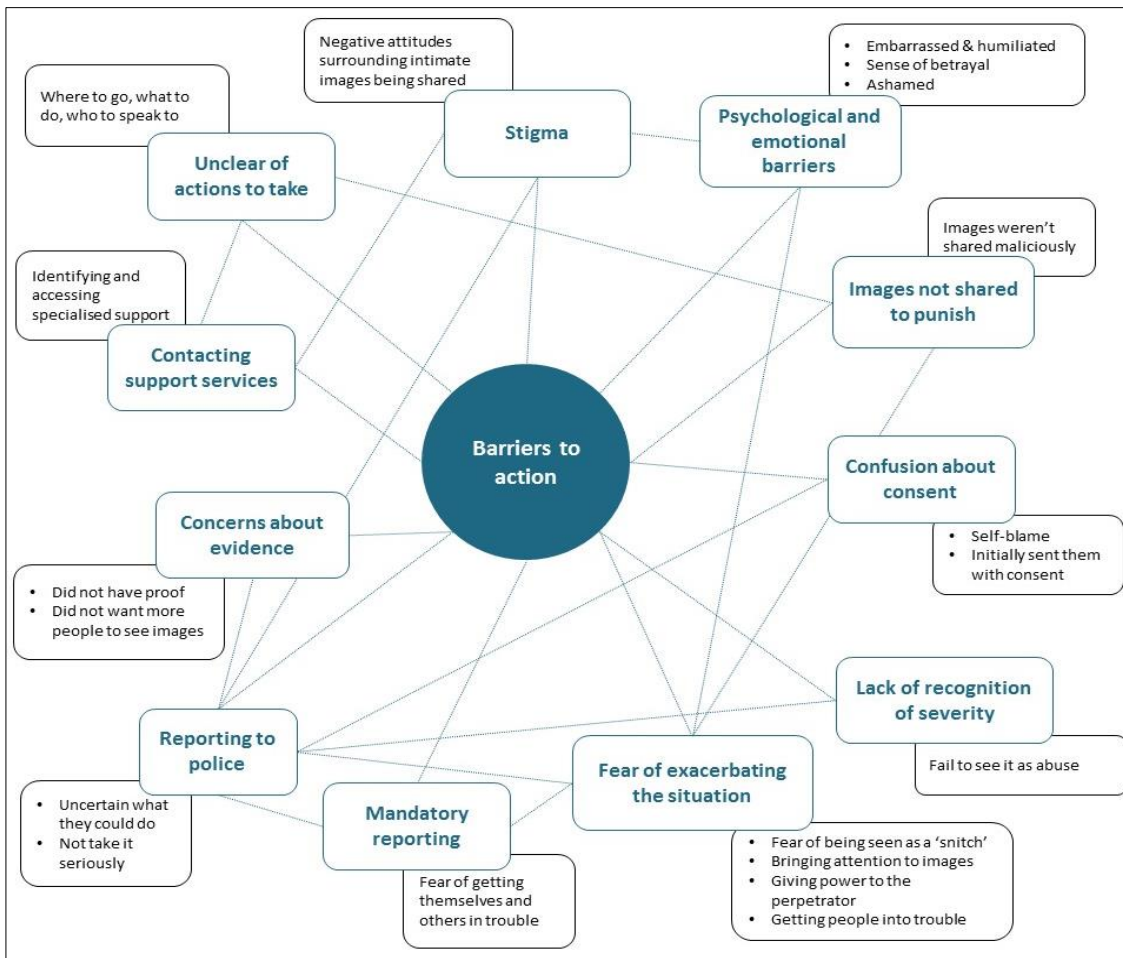
Actions taken by victims of image-based abuse

Due to the many barriers victims faced in seeking support for image-based abuse, victims often felt limited in what they could do. However, the help-seeking behaviours among victims included:

Speaking to friends and family about the image-based abuse

> *I spoke to my dad who is a police officer and I was expecting him to be really angry with me…My dad comforted me and made me feel like it wasn't my fault. (Female victim, online discussion board no. 8)*

Many victims described speaking to friends and family about the image-based abuse as a first step. Their response was crucial to how the victim mentally and emotionally handled the situation thereafter. Generally, victims felt that the most positive, helpful reaction from family and friends was when they offered support, empathy and reassurance that they were not at fault as opposed to giving guidance about what to do next. Some friends of the victims spoke directly to the perpetrator about their behaviour or explained the context and seriousness of the situation to bystanders.

Confronting the perpetrator

> *And after that kind of happened, I confronted him. I was so upset. I was crying and crying and crying, and he was just denying it and denying it and denying it. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 17)*

Another common response of victims was to confront their perpetrator. They did this either themselves or through friends and family, via messaging services such as SMS or Facebook Messenger or face-to-face. Perpetrators were asked why they decided to act in that way or for them to remove or delete the images they had shared. However, it was felt that doing so did not result in any benefits for the victims because perpetrators would often deny any wrongdoing; be nonchalant about what they had done; or blame the victim for sending the images in the first place.

Finding information and support online

> I mean, you chuck in Google what to do when your nudes have been sent to people and not much really comes up. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 6)

Some victims discussed conducting online searches for information, advice and support about image-based abuse. Nearly all who did so said they were unsuccessful because they were unsure of what to search for, or found that the information available focused on the prevention of image-based abuse. There was very limited information about what to do if it happened. In addition, online forums where the victims shared their stories of image-based abuse were perceived to be extreme cases, making victims feel as though their own incidents were insignificant in comparison.

Seeking help from services, such as mental health professionals, school staff and support services

> I had a chat with the school, actually I think it was the senior coordinator first who then flicked it off to the principal and he said well it's social media it's not something that happened on school grounds we can't do anything about it, it's not our problem. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 11)

Some victims sought assistance from mental health professionals with whom they had a pre-existing relationship; school staff; or telephone support services. The pre-established relationship between victims and their counsellors and psychologists enabled victims to find emotional support after the incident. However, victims who sought help from their school found staff to be unhelpful and reticent to address the issue within the school environment. Unhelpful responses included calling into question student resilience, suggesting moving classes and being unable to take action because events did not occur on school grounds. Most victims who directly approached support services either over the phone or in a face-to-face setting reported benefits, such as the ability to 'vent' and receive support and sympathy from a stranger, although many felt there was a lack of practical advice.

Directly approaching online hosts to take down the images

> All the Deviant Art ones, they got taken down eventually. It just took a long time to see results. Some I had to resubmit [requests to remove photos] ... Photo Bucket, they took forever. I think it even took a couple of years to get that done. I had to email them multiple times from different addresses and they were terrible. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 4)

Only a few respondents mentioned approaching online hosts to ask them to remove the unauthorised images from their sites. Of those, most reported that assistance from online hosts could be difficult and Australian hosted websites were the most responsive in removing images. Where images were placed on overseas websites, the difficulties in contacting and removing images added to the anxiety of the victim. It was also reported by a few victims and one stakeholder that approaching websites using the copyright legal framework resulted in a greater inclination from online hosts toward removing those images.

Reporting to police

> They were really good, actually, and I was beside myself because I just thought I couldn't possibly be any more humiliated than I had been. It's embarrassing that they have to look at that sort of thing, but they rest assured that no-one else would – the officer that I was dealing with said it wouldn't be public knowledge in the police station. Obviously, they'd know there was charges but they wouldn't

> *necessarily get to see the footage or that sort of thing. So, that made me feel quite comforted in the fact that I wasn't going to be further violated. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 12)*

> *Well, I suppose if I'm being kind, there's a lack of resource[s] and police just can't investigate all these things. (Stakeholder, women's legal service, in-depth interview no. 5)*

Few victims reported image-based abuse to police. When it was reported, victims recall receiving a variety of responses from police staff. While some felt that the police were understanding and supportive, others felt they were not believed, and victims were often told that there was nothing that the police could do to assist. Victims felt that police would have greater power to influence the removal of images from websites, but found that it was common that police had limited powers to enforce this, despite their efforts to assist. However, police authority was considered to be helpful in cases where the victim was underage.

Impact of image-based abuse

Respondents discussed the perceived impacts of image-based abuse on both the victims and those around them.

Impacts on the victim

> *I think it made me put a lot less value in myself for a long time. (Female victim, in-depth interview no.15)*

The impacts of being a victim of image-based abuse were, in many cases, deeply damaging. The main impacts were psychological and emotional: feelings of fear, shame, humiliation, anger, sadness and depression. Respondents reported experiencing considerable fear and anxiety both during and in the aftermath of the abuse and particularly after some kind of trigger or reminder of the event. Likewise, respondents were anxious and fearful of pictures resurfacing and so having a further impact on their lives. In terms of the psychological health impacts of this abuse, respondents reported having sleeping difficulties, stress headaches and stomach-aches, while others also described being overly self-conscious of their bodies. Socially, victims often experienced self-imposed isolation and withdrawal which then negatively impacted victims' personal lives. Coupled with this, respondents also reported the loss of friendship groups through the judgement and shaming caused by a victim-blaming mentality.

> *Having photos of me shared around really affected my friend and family communications. My boyfriend's mother made me stop seeing him and I felt alone, heartbroken and lost.*

> *(Female victim, online discussion board no. 10)*

Another common impact reported by victims and stakeholders alike was reduced social media engagement and online presence, and anxiety around sharing information. This meant deleting social media accounts, using pseudonyms or not posting 'selfies' or other personal information and making use of increased online security measures. Victims reported that their employment and education were significantly impacted by their experiences. Several victims reported needing to take time off while others had to leave their jobs entirely. For those still in education, victims who were school-aged spoke of finding it intensely difficult to go to school at the time of the abuse with several taking time off and some either performing poorly or feeling the need to leave school entirely.

Impacts on others

Beyond the impacts on victims, respondents also spoke about the impacts on the families and children of those affected by image-based abuse. They talked about the effect on parents of victims and the emotional strain and stress caused by those incidents.

> *My mum was beside herself. She was an emotional wreck during this. I'd come home and she would be beside herself. My mum was giving up smoking, taking it back up, giving up smoking, taking it back up. She took it back up during this point in time, and so did I. (Female victim, in-depth interview no. 3)*

Responsibility for support and prevention

Support for, and prevention of, image-based abuse was discussed by respondents. Discussions centred around the role of government and statutory authorities, the law, educational institutions and wider community responsibility, including some suggestions from some victims of personal responsibility. The findings primarily related to the need for greater general community education to increase public recognition of the seriousness of image-based abuse both in a legal sense and the impact it can have on individuals, the wider community and society.

Education in schools was mooted as the most effective way to raise awareness, discuss consequences and enact change. It was suggested that education around cyber safety and image-based abuse needed to be taught throughout the school years, not just as a one-off lesson. Education and advice needed to be continually updated to reflect changes in technology.

Respondents also identified a need for parents and police to take greater action in preventing image-based abuse and supporting victims.

Respondents felt that legal processes were confusing and complex, and most victims called for improved legislation and legal recourse. In addition, respondents felt that online hosts and social media providers needed to take more responsibility in responding to image-based abuse that occurred when people used their platforms, ensuring that images were removed and further circulation was prevented.

Respondents' suggestions for supporting victims

The research found a widespread sense of a lack of information and resources to support victims of image-based abuse, and a lack of awareness of where to access them. Many victims spoke of finding it difficult to find out what information, if any, was available to help them. The provision of information and support in one place was welcomed.

Respondents' suggestions for the kind of information and resources to be made available on Office's online portal included:

- immediate safety and crisis information

- how to report and the relevant legal processes, action pathways victims can take

- reassurance that they are not the only person this has happened to and that they are not to blame

- statistics and data on image-based abuse

- explaining what 'image-based abuse' is

- how to discuss the topic with others such as parents or friends

- technical information such as different social media channels that can be used and privacy settings on apps

- recognising the impacts of image-based abuse

- case studies showing that image-based abuse happens to others and that are ways of managing it, addressing the impacts and 'surviving'.

Further suggestions by respondents related to:

- more dialogue and community awareness of image-based abuse through media and public information campaigns aimed at facilitating the removal of stigma, shame and victim blaming.

- better access to mental health services—both face-to-face and telephone.

- more accountability placed on the part of the perpetrator.

About the research

In 2017, the Office initiated a mixed-methods research project to inform its development of a national online portal to help victims of image-based abuse. This research comprises 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 qualitative research.

Research objectives and methodology

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

The overall aim of the qualitative research was to better understand the experiences of image-based abuse among Australian women aged 15-45 years. Specifically, the objectives of the qualitative research were to:

- Explore the context within which images are shared, including the sex of the perpetrator, connection to the perpetrator and pattern of abusive behaviour.

- Understand victims' attitudes and behaviours towards help seeking and reporting in relation to image-based abuse, such as the sources and nature, as well as the effectiveness of actions taken.

- Understand the emotional, relational and other impacts of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images on victims.

A total of 38 in-depth interviews were conducted, comprising 17 with female victims and 21 with stakeholders. A further 10 victims participated in an online discussion board. All victims were between the ages of 18 to 44 at the time of participation; however, they were able to speak of incidents occurring when they were at school and underage. Additionally, two formative focus groups were conducted with women aged 18-25 to explore language and terminology related to image-based abuse.

All fieldwork was conducted during March and April 2017. Victims were recruited through a range of channels including paid Facebook advertising and specialist recruitment agencies. Stakeholders were identified via a contact list provided by RMIT University as well as additional channels.

Using an analytical framework, anonymised transcripts and the online discussion board data were 'coded' using NVivo, a software program designed to support a thematic analysis of the data.

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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.