

Revenge Porn and Mental Health: A Qualitative Analysis of the Mental Health Effects of Revenge Porn on Female Survivors

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Abstract

This study examines the emotional and mental health effects revenge porn has on female survivors. To date, no other academic studies have exclusively focused on mental health effects in revenge porn cases. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted between February 2014 and January 2015 with 18 female revenge porn survivors, and inductive analysis revealed participants' experiences of trust issues, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and several other mental health effects. These findings reveal the seriousness of revenge porn, the devastating impacts it has on survivors' mental health, and similarities between revenge porn and sexual assault.

Keywords

mental health, revenge porn, pornography, qualitative research, sexual assault, sexual harassment, victimization

Introduction

Nonconsensual pornography is a relatively new phenomenon that has grown substantially in the past few years, and involves uploading nude or semi-nude images/videos of a person online without their consent. Some nonconsensual pornography website administrators use computer hacking to obtain nude photos from women, and then

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extort them by pressuring them to pay a fee to have their photos removed (Laird, 2013). The public and the media have commonly referred to nonconsensual pornography as “revenge porn.” Revenge porn occurs when a person uploads nude/semi-nude photos of someone online, often as revenge after a relationship has ended. Hence, revenge porn is included under the umbrella of nonconsensual pornography, but nonconsensual pornography does not always include revenge porn.

Several nonconsensual pornography websites encourage users to submit nude photos of their ex-partner(s) for revenge. These websites often include forums that allow others to leave derogatory or salacious comments about the women in the photos. The first revenge porn website—*isanyoneup.com*—was created in 2010 by Hunter Moore (Stroud, 2014). In a 3-month period in 2011, the website received 10,000 photo submissions. Moore gained a significant profit from advertising on the website, sometimes bringing in US\$13,000 per month in revenue. The website was eventually shut down after Moore sold the website to an anti-bullying organization for an undisclosed amount, citing “legal hassles” and underage pornography submissions as reasons for selling the website (Visser, 2012). However, several other nonconsensual pornography websites have since been created and have gained a large following (Stroud, 2014).

The impact of nonconsensual pornography includes public shame and humiliation, an inability to find new romantic partners, mental health effects such as depression and anxiety, job loss or problems securing new employment, and offline harassment and stalking (Citron & Franks, 2014). Citron and Franks (2014) reported on a nonrandom sample of 1,244 nonconsensual pornography survivors, and found that more than 50% of survivors’ full names and links to social media profiles accompanied the naked photos, and that 20% of survivors’ email addresses and phone numbers were posted with their photos. Once a photo is posted online, it is challenging to completely remove from the Internet, which means the harm is continuous and long lasting (Cecil, 2014). In an attempt to reduce the emotional impacts of nonconsensual pornography, some women delete their online social media accounts. Removing all social media profiles often separates women from positive social connections with friends and family, as social media is a commonplace, contemporary way to stay connected with loved ones. Apart from the Internet, in “real life,” some women completely alter their lives and routines to minimize the impact of nonconsensual pornography (Cecil, 2014).

Nonconsensual pornography did not exist on such a broad scale even 5 years ago. Smartphones, digital cameras, and computers have revolutionized photography—individuals frequently use smartphones for photography, and upload photos online in the privacy of their own homes. A richer discussion of nonconsensual pornography has been present in the media recently, particularly through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media has contributed to a vocal feminist backlash against female oppression, as social media allows thoughts to be broadcasted to large audiences (Rentschler, 2014). Even more recently, a widespread “celebrity photo leak” involving naked photos of many A-list celebrities, including Jennifer Lawrence and Kate Upton, sparked an even deeper discussion in the media regarding nonconsensual pornography, female oppression, and consent. A Google search of “celebrity photo leak 2014” provides more than 2 million results with many online news articles, and

even an entire Wikipedia page concerning how a long list of female celebrities experienced nonconsensual pornography on a single day, August 31, 2014.

Despite recent media attention to nonconsensual pornography, relatively few academic studies focus on the topic. The few published academic articles regarding nonconsensual pornography concentrate mainly on its legal aspects and legal theories about these cases. As of April 2016, no published peer-reviewed studies focus exclusively on the experiences of nonconsensual pornography survivors, the toll it takes on their mental health, and how this type of victimization is strikingly similar to sexual assault. The present study is designed to address this gap in the literature by providing a detailed analysis of the mental health issues and coping mechanisms of revenge porn survivors, and the similarities between revenge porn and other forms of sexual victimization. For the purposes of this study, Bhugra, Till, and Sartorius's (2013) definition of mental health will be used. They define mental health as "a state of the organism that allows the full performance of all its functions or as a state of balance within oneself and between oneself and one's physical and social environment" (p. 3); a person who is mentally healthy

has the ability to form and maintain affectionate relationships with others, to perform in the social roles usually played in their culture and to manage change, recognize, acknowledge and communicate positive actions and thoughts as well as to manage emotions such as sadness. Mental health gives an individual the feeling of worth, control and understanding of internal and external functioning. (p. 3)

Literature Review

Sexting Behavior Among Young Adults

Revenge porn often involves an ex-partner uploading naked photos that were obtained through sexting, which typically includes sending naked or semi-nude photos to another person through electronic means, such as text messaging. In Samimi and Alderson's (2014) survey, no gender differences in sexting frequency were found. However, men were more likely to have positive feelings toward sexting, whereas women were more likely to feel cautious and anxious about sexting. Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, and Cyders (2013) came to the same conclusion in their study of sexting behaviors among young adults.

Individuals in committed, romantic relationships are more likely to sext than those not in a relationship (Dir et al., 2013; Samimi & Alderson, 2014). Interestingly, much of the negative media attention concerning sexting revolves around the notion that careless young women send nude photos to anyone without considering the potential risks (Albury & Crawford, 2012). Findings from Samimi and Alderson (2014) and Dir et al. (2013) indicate that women generally do not send nude photos to men they do not know. Instead, a level of trust is likely necessary before women feel comfortable sending a nude photo. This outlook counters the "she should have known better" argument—an argument especially prominent in revenge porn cases. Negative consequences from sexting such as revenge porn may also be understood within the context that women are

more likely to be sexually assaulted by someone they know rather than a stranger (Clay-Warner & Burt, 2005).

Revenge Porn as a Sexual Offense

Bloom (2014) argued that revenge porn “should be classified as a sexual offense because of its similarity to other types of sexual offenses, like sexual assault and sexual harassment” (p. 278). Feminist explanations of sexual assault focus on rape as an act of male domination over women rather than an act of sex. When men commit sexual assault, it is not simply out of an uncontrollable urge for sexual gratification, but rather motivated by desires of power, a hatred of women, and the need to reaffirm stereotypical gender roles that place women under the control of men (Chapleau & Oswald, 2010; Day, 1995; Ellis, 1989). Chiroro, Bohner, Viki, and Jarvis (2004) found that men have a motivation to exert power over women through sex, and that being dominant over a woman is sexually stimulating for men. Their survey of 310 men indicated that men enjoy “getting their way” in a rape situation. This suggests men have a desire to exert sexual dominance over women through rape, rather than rape involving a “loss of control” due to being too sexually aroused to stop. Similarly, men who post naked photos of their ex-partners online may enjoy the power they have over women and the amount of suffering they are able to inflict.

Risk management is a prominent sexual assault prevention tactic advised by authorities, society, and some sexual assault prevention campaigns, whereby women are held partially responsible for avoiding sexual assault. Risk management advocates for women to avoid certain situations to reduce their chances of being sexually assaulted, for example, by suggesting women travel in groups or avoid walking alone at night (Carmody & Carrington, 2000). Risk management to prevent sexual assault comes from the context and belief that women’s bodies are “risky spaces” (Hall, 2004, p. 3). From a risk management perspective, sexual assault is considered part and parcel of life and to counteract it, women must take preventive measures to avoid being raped. Taken to its extreme, risk management places the responsibility solely on women to avoid being raped, and absolves rapists of responsibility because women’s bodies are “inert spaces waiting to be invaded/taken” (Hall, 2004, p. 3), allowing for victim-blaming when women fail to take precautions and are subsequently sexually assaulted. Similar to sexual assault, survivors of nonconsensual pornography are often blamed for their victimization. Media and online communities commonly advocate risk management strategies to avoid revenge porn. One online blog lists “8 sexting rules” to avoid becoming a victim of revenge porn, suggesting that women should not send naked photos if they have not been in a relationship with the recipient for less than 1 year, and to only send naked photos if their head is not in the photo (Brown-Warsham, 2012). Another online news website published an article about revenge porn titled “To Avoid Revenge Porn, Don’t Let Someone Film You Having Sex” (Gray, 2014). Much like sexual assault prevention risk management, these common “avoiding revenge porn” propositions place the responsibility primarily on women and often absolve the perpetrator of any responsibility.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment often has negative mental health effects for women. Ho, Dinh, Bellfontaine, and Irving (2012) found that posttraumatic stress (PTS) symptoms were related to sexual harassment, and that sexual harassment frequency and the severity of PTS symptoms significantly predicted other negative mental health effects. Gruber and Fineran (2007) came to similar conclusions, and found that sexual rumors being spread about oneself was the most distressing form of sexual harassment for women. As revenge porn can arguably be considered a sexual offense (Bloom, 2014), considering the negative mental health effects of sexual harassment for women helps provide a close theoretical parallel between victimization in these two areas. Knowing that sexual harassment results in discomfort and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it is not difficult to make the connection that revenge porn survivors may experience these same phenomena.

Sexual harassment also occurs online, and the online environment allows men more freedom to sexually harass women due to its anonymous nature. Men may feel that because they cannot be identified when they write harassing comments online, there are no limitations to prevent them from making sexual comments they would not say to women in person (Barak, 2005). In some instances, women shut down their blogs, social media pages, and online accounts due to persistent sexual harassment from men (Franks, 2011). Previous research has suggested that men enjoy the power they exert over women through sex (Chiroro et al., 2004). Online sexual harassment, as well as revenge porn, may be understood in this way. When men post nonconsensual pornography online, they hold a certain degree of power over women, as nonconsensual pornography can ruin a woman's chances of employment, her family life/friendships, and self-esteem.

Sexual Victimization and Mental Health

Women who experience sexual victimization often feel shame and embarrassment regarding their victimization. Weiss (2010) examined the involvement of shame in sexual assault cases, and found that sexual assault survivors typically believed that it was their own fault they were sexually assaulted, were too embarrassed to report to the police, and were afraid that their private lives/sexual pasts would be made public. Koss (2006) found that sexual assault survivors were less likely to report to the police when the perpetrator was someone they knew due to shame, embarrassment, and feeling they would not be believed. Monroe, Kinney, Weist, Dantzler, and Reynolds (2005) also found that some sexual assault survivors experience shame and a loss in self-esteem.

Sexual assault survivors commonly experience numerous mental health issues, such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, self-blame, substance abuse, and denial/avoidance (Campbell, 2008; Cohen & Roth, 1987; Kilpatrick & Acierno, 2003). Ward (1998) found that sexual assault survivors frequently repress their memories of the event to avoid trauma and anxiety, and that 90% of survivors use defense mechanisms in

response to painful memories of the assault. Although avoidance and denial are common coping mechanisms, the longer sexual assault survivors engage in these behaviors, the more likely they are to engage in self-blame and experience more disruptive mental health effects, such as PTSD (Boeschen, Koss, Figueredo, & Coan, 2001). Mental health issues after sexual assault also stem from treatment by law enforcement and medical practitioners, and social treatment from the community. Law enforcement officials frequently discourage sexual assault survivors from making official reports, graphically describing the grueling legal processes involved in prosecuting rape cases (Campbell, 2008). Social systems in the community frequently treat stranger-rape as more serious than acquaintance-rape, which does a disservice to survivors as most sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances (Campbell, 2008).

Method

The purpose of this qualitative, interview-based study was to understand the experiences of revenge porn survivors and how revenge porn affected their mental health. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 female revenge porn survivors. Inclusion criteria for this study had two components: (a) Participants had to be 19 years of age or older, and (b) participants had to self-identify as victims or survivors of revenge porn. Some participants referred to themselves solely as “survivors,” some referred to themselves solely as “victims,” and some participants referred to themselves as both “survivors” and “victims” at different points throughout the interviews. For the purposes of this article, participants will be referred to as “survivors” of revenge porn, which implies a more empowering label rather than giving “victim” labels that imply less agency. Allowing self-identification for inclusion criteria resulted in a broad range of revenge porn cases, ranging from survivors who experienced a widespread web release of naked photos, to photos being shared on a smaller scale (such as with a social circle), and to being threatened or blackmailed with naked photos. Although there was a broad range of revenge porn cases among participants, common themes and patterns were found.

Participants were recruited primarily through Snowball sampling after finding two initial participants who worked for an organization that provides assistance to revenge porn survivors. One of these participants put the researcher in contact with survivors she had worked with, which is how 13 additional participants were recruited. Three final participants were volunteers who heard about the study through the researcher or through friends and acquaintances. Interviews were conducted between February 2014 and January 2015.

Participants were given a choice of communication methods for the interviews, resulting in all interviews being conducted electronically through Skype, FaceTime, telephone, or Google Hangouts. Participants were aged 21 to 54 years, with an average age of 31 years. Four participants lived in Canada, 13 lived in the United States, and one lived in England (though was originally American). Because the focus of this project was on personal experiences and generic social processes, physical location

was not considered an important factor contributing to the experience of revenge porn victimization.

Participants who knew the perpetrator (one did not know who released the photos) identified as being in a heterosexual relationship with the partner involved with the revenge porn. The exclusion of same sex couples was not intentional, as attempts were made to find survivors of any gender identity or sexual orientation. However, the researcher was unable to find any participants who identified as LGBTQ¹ through Snowball sampling and out of those who volunteered. Demographic information regarding race/ethnicity was not collected, which is a limitation of this study. The limited range of participants undermined the potential for a richer, intersectional approach, which would highlight multiple oppressions as well as a wide range of resources and strategies. Certainly, future research on the impact of revenge porn should further explore these factors by covering a much wider range of sexual relationships including LGBTQ relationships, and exploring how individuals of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds experience revenge porn.

The average interview length was approximately 80 min, with the shortest lasting 30 min and the longest lasting 120 min. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and then transcribed, except for one interview, which involved a text-based real-time Skype chat. For this interview, the entire conversation was copied and pasted into a word document, which served as the interview transcript, and identifiers were removed for confidentiality purposes.

Pseudonyms were given to 15 out of the 18 participants to protect their identities. However, three participants (AnnMarie, Anisha, and Nikki) requested their real first names be used. They were all public with their stories, participated in interviews with newspapers and the media, and were involved with activist work regarding revenge porn. Including their names in this study was a way of respecting them, their contribution, their advocacy work, and their wishes.

Transcripts from the 18 interviews were imported into NVivo 10 for analysis. Three stages of inductive coding were utilized to organize and separate the different themes that arose throughout the interviews. Descriptive Coding, also called Topic Coding, involves summarizing small sections of data with a word or a short phrase (Saldaña, 2012). Descriptive Coding was used during the initial read-through of the interview transcripts in *NVivo* to obtain a broad sense of the primary themes of the interviews. This coding method helps researchers sort through their data to understand the basic components of the information they have collected (Saldaña, 2012). The second phase of coding involved revisiting each of these broad descriptive codes and narrowing them down with subcodes. For example, in the code “family,” some of the subcodes identified were “judgment from family” and “support from family.” The third phase of coding involved reorganizing the codes into main themes for discussion in the “Findings” section. There were several themes that emerged from the inductive analysis, but for the purpose of this article, mental health issues participants encountered after victimization, as well as their coping mechanisms, will be the two primary areas of focus.

Participant Experiences With Revenge Porn

As previously mentioned, inclusion criteria for participation required participants to self-identify as revenge porn victims/survivors, which resulted in a broad range of revenge porn cases. Most participants experienced a widespread web release of their photos, but some participants had ex-partners who selectively shared the photos with their smaller social circle, and a few participants were blackmailed/threatened with naked photos but the photos did not appear online. Some participants also experienced harassment, stalking, and other unwanted behaviors from their ex-partners in addition to the revenge porn. A more concentrated scope of revenge porn cases may have provided different results, as more serious cases involving physical abuse or threats would likely have more dramatic effects. Future research should focus on different types of revenge porn and consider other actions accompanying revenge porn postings, such as additional harassment, stalking, and physical threats/abuse to fully understand the complexities of revenge porn. To provide more context and concrete examples regarding differences between participants' victimization, four participants' experiences with revenge porn are included below:

AnnMarie: Her ex-boyfriend posted an eBay auction for a disc containing naked photos of her, which she successfully had taken down from eBay. However, a year later, he created a porn website with the naked photos of her, which included her full name, the name of her town, the name of the college she taught at, and a solicitation saying, "hot for teacher? Come get it."

Karla: Her ex-boyfriend was a photographer and took nude portraits of her before they began dating. After they dated and broke up, he discovered her new boyfriend was a professor at the university she attended. He then sent the nude portraits of her to professors in the department she was studying in and to professors in her boyfriend's department.

Regina: Her ex-husband brought her to a hotel room and drugged her. She had no memory of what happened, but later found out that he and another man had raped her. She divorced him shortly after, and seven months later he sent a video containing footage of the rape to the school board where she worked. She was fired from her job as a school superintendent immediately after the video was sent to her colleagues, and the police were still investigating the rape at the time of the interview.

Nikki: Her ex-boyfriend set up hidden cameras around her home, and she ended the relationship shortly after discovering he was secretly filming her. After she broke up with him, he created a website and several social media pages using unflattering and nude photos of her from the footage. He also made several threats against her and her family, including death threats.

These four participants experienced revenge porn in very different ways, as did most participants in this study. In addition to the naked photos, all participants experienced small differences that made their victimization unique when compared with each other. However, despite these small differences in the ways participants were

victimized, common themes regarding mental health and coping mechanisms were found among all participants, which are discussed below in the findings section.

Findings

This section is comprised of two main themes: (a) Mental Health and (b) Coping Mechanisms. Under Mental Health, there are three subthemes that focus on participants' mental health issues after victimization: (a) trust issues after revenge porn; (b) PTSD, anxiety, and depression; and (c) self-esteem, confidence, and loss of control. Overall, participants experienced many disruptive mental health issues after victimization that affected their daily lives. Under Coping Mechanisms, there are two subthemes that focus on participants' coping mechanisms to their victimization: (a) negative coping mechanisms and (b) positive coping mechanisms. Participants generally engaged in negative coping mechanisms, such as denial and self-medicating, closer to when they were victimized, and turned to positive coping mechanisms, such as seeking counseling, as time passed.

Mental Health

Subtheme 1: "I am much more hesitant to give my trust": Trust issues after revenge porn. Nearly all participants discussed a general loss of trust in others after being victimized by revenge porn. Many went from being very trusting to rarely trusting anyone after they were betrayed by someone they loved and cared about. Anisha explained her dramatic shift in trusting others:

I used to be that type of person that would like, I'd meet you and I'd trust you. Like, I trusted you until you proved that you couldn't be trusted. Now I'm the type of person that I don't trust you until you prove that you can be trusted. (Anisha)

She was friends with her ex-boyfriend for 10 years and dated him for 4 years before he cheated on her and posted naked photos of her online after they broke up. Anisha felt that if someone she trusted so deeply could betray her, she needed to be more cautious about whom to trust. Emma expressed similar feelings:

Someone that told me that they loved me and wanted to spend their life with me turned around and did everything in their power to hurt me and to make my life miserable . . . I've traditionally been one of those people who's been like, "I will give you my trust until you damage it," and now I am much more hesitant to give my trust. (Emma)

Claire's trust in her fiancé diminished, as she felt it was partially his fault that his ex-wife had access to the "boudoir photos" of her. Her fiancé's ex-wife was visiting at their home because her fiancé had children with his ex-wife during their marriage. The ex-wife went through his tablet—which was not password protected—and found boudoir photos of Claire. She attempted to post them online from the tablet,

but a technical issue occurred and the photos had not appeared on the website at the time of the interview. She also sent them to Claire's abusive ex-partner as well. Claire and her fiancé discovered the ex-wife's attempts by looking at a "sent" folder on the tablet. Although the photos did not appear online, Claire was worried that they might be posted in the future. She was still engaged to her fiancé, but did not feel she was able to completely trust him to protect her privacy because he was "too accommodating" to his ex-wife.

Sacha's ex-boyfriend was a former coworker, which contributed to her mistrust of coworkers at her new job. She mentioned that she did not have many interactions with anyone at her new job, especially men:

At my job now I don't really want to talk to any men or anything 'cause like you just don't know who's capable of, like I didn't think [ex-boyfriend from previous job] was capable of something like that, and I just don't want to get involved . . . I didn't try to get involved with [ex-boyfriend] either, but it just kind of like happened because he tried to get me to trust him and stuff, so that's not gonna happen again, it's just too much for me. (Sacha)

The betrayal of trust participants experienced partially contributed to their anxiety and depression, which are further discussed below.

Subtheme 2: "I can admit now that I was suicidal": PTSD, anxiety and depression. Along with the loss of trust, many participants experienced more severe and disruptive mental health effects, often being given official medical diagnoses of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. AnnMarie had an official diagnosis of depression and PTSD, and attempted suicide after her ex-boyfriend created a porn website with the naked photos of her. She became obsessive afterward, constantly checking to make sure the photos had not resurfaced online, and suffered severe anxiety that disrupted her everyday life and sleep patterns:

I didn't sleep for months . . . when this happened in 2010, I would pop awake, and I would have to check my e-mail address, my work e-mail address, my Facebook page, I had this ritual, and I would have to perform this ritual. I'd check eBay, I'd Google my name, you know, the same thing. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . . I had to do these things. I'd do them three or four times, and be able to go back to sleep. But then I'd wake up. Or like in the middle of the day, I'd stop dead and I'd have to do this ritual, I'd have to do it three or four times, and then I'd be okay for a little while. I'd feel like I had to do that, for months. In 2011, when the posting went up . . . there was nothing I could do, and the police wouldn't help me, I felt so hopeless and so helpless . . . Someone else had defined my destiny. (AnnMarie)

Her anxiety and depression lessened over time, but it took a couple of years for her to feel normal again and to stop constantly thinking about revenge porn. Regina had a similar experience after her ex-husband released a video of her being raped by him and another man. The video was emailed to her colleagues at the school board she worked

at. She spoke through tears as she told her story of the impacts revenge porn had on her mental health:

When the actual video was released, um, well, I can admit now that I was suicidal, and . . . to let you know how suicidal I was, I didn't tell anybody because I knew if I told anyone that I just wanted to kill myself that they would try to stop me, so I didn't tell anyone because I didn't want anyone to stop me . . . I lost my reputation . . . financially I'm ruined, I lost my career, a 25-year stellar career . . . I had a doctorate degree. I lost everything. So, how did that make me feel? Um, devastated. I just don't even have words to describe it. Horrifying, humiliated, embarrassed, betrayed, I mean, I just never thought that a man I had loved, I married him, he was my husband, I trusted him. How could he do something like this? So I just felt very, very worthless. (Regina)

Anisha suffered from anxiety in public, especially at night. She changed her routines and behaviors when she was alone due to strangers showing up at her house looking for sex after seeing naked photos of her on the Internet. Her ex-boyfriend used internet chat rooms and pretended to be her online. He would send naked photos of her to strangers, give them her home address, and ask them to come over to her house for sex. She mentioned one time in particular when a man broke into her house, grabbed her, and tried to choke her. She was able to escape and run away, but became very anxious about being alone, even at home:

I'm more cautious of my surroundings of course like, when I go home and I know that I'm by myself and it's dark out I make sure that no one's following me, I make sure that . . . I like, get in my garage, I turn my car off, I close the garage door right away. I have my alarm on all the time. I keep mace on me. Like, I try to do everything to protect me. If I feel uncomfortable in any situation I make sure someone walks me out . . . It's life altering 'cause like you realize how cautious you have to be. (Anisha)

Karla discussed how she had never been a nervous or anxious person despite going through a lot of "other difficult circumstances." This changed after her ex-boyfriend sent naked photos of her to her university professors, which resulted in increased anxiety about many "little things" in her life. Her anxiety was amplified by the fact that her ex-boyfriend still had the naked photos of her, and that she had no control over what he might do with them in the future:

My nerves are still really jumpy, far more so than I ever was before. I'll jump at little things, or I'll get really anxious about things. I never had anxiety before. I've gone through a lot of other difficult circumstances in my life, but I was never anxious. I would worry about them but I never felt panicky in my chest . . . and so after [the revenge porn] happened I felt like it really contributed to how I deal with things that I worry about now, because I get much more panicky and feel like "oh my god, the consequences of this are gonna be earth-shattering," whereas I never really felt like that before, because now it's always in the back of my mind that those pictures are out there somewhere. (Karla)

Nikki and Tasha also suffered negative mental health effects after victimization. Nikki discussed how her anxiety was tied to her concerns about her physical well-being. Along with the revenge porn, fake social media pages, and online stalking/harassment, her ex-boyfriend also made several physical threats against her and her family, including death threats. She mentioned how her ex-boyfriend's actions caused her to become "very stressed," and that she often was either unable to sleep or slept for days. Tasha's doctor prescribed her anti-anxiety medication because she was initially unable to concentrate on tasks at work after her ex-boyfriend posted naked photos of her to a revenge porn website. She also experienced anxiety when she was in public:

I'm sort of always on edge any time I'm out in public by myself, you know. Because you never know who has seen it or who hasn't seen it, or you know if somebody . . . looks at you like you look familiar or something like that, you kind of wonder how they know you . . . You never know who's seen it, which is like the creepiest part about it, like more than anything . . . So it's really kind of unnerving to be by myself in public. (Tasha)

Given that revenge porn shares many similarities with sexual assault and sexual harassment, it should come as no surprise that the revenge porn survivors in this study experienced many of the same mental health effects that sexual assault survivors experience (Gilboa-Schechtman & Foa, 2001; Littleton & Henderson, 2009). After a sexual assault, many women have high levels of stress, alcohol use, PTSD, clinical depression, and blame themselves for the assault (Miller, Handley, Markman, & Miller, 2010; Woody & Beldin, 2012). Burgess (1983) called this "rape trauma syndrome," which is the "stress response pattern" after a woman is sexually assaulted (p. 97).

Subtheme 3: "I didn't have control over who they were distributed to": Self-esteem, confidence, and loss of control. Many participants noticed a change in their self-esteem and confidence after they were victimized. Hannah mentioned that her confidence and self-esteem were destroyed, stating, "if you were to talk to me six or seven months ago I probably would have been bawling my eyes out about it." Karla lost a lot of confidence in herself, especially sexually, after her ex-boyfriend sent naked photos of her to her university professors:

I felt really strange about my sexuality, so I didn't feel like I could go out in the clubs and be sexy; I just didn't feel like that was okay . . . Even privately, I still feel really weird about being sexy and flirtatious, and stuff like that, whereas beforehand I was like an expert flirt, never had to buy any of my own drinks in a bar or anything like that, and I could talk to guys no problem and I wasn't nervous about it. In class I would be social and make friends, but after that I wasn't as outspoken or outgoing, I was just more reserved and more conservative and more private, so I think that affected my confidence, certainly. (Karla)

Sarah felt that the naked photos stripped her of her femininity and affected how she viewed her body. She said the photos were extremely unflattering and that "nobody should ever be photographed from that angle," which her ex-boyfriend used to make her feel like she was not "doing a good job of being a woman."

Part of the reason that revenge porn had such a negative effect on participants' self-esteem and confidence was the loss of control they experienced. Josephine discussed how one of the worst parts of being blackmailed/threatened with naked photos was that someone hacked into the private messages of the man to whom she had sent the photos. A jealous woman hacked into the man's Facebook account and read through his and Josephine's messages, which included the photos. The invasion of privacy was particularly traumatic:

Those messages to the gentleman happened on a weekend, my personal life, personal time. For me, it seems like a crime for someone to be hacking somebody's computer and grabbing messages and photos and sharing them with other people, and in my case it was particularly bad because I was a public official and it just seems so wrong to do that to anyone. You know, it's your personal, private, e-mail area, whether it's a Gmail or a Facebook e-mail, it's private, it's your domain, you know? (Josephine)

Karla also felt that the loss of control was the most traumatic part of being victimized. Her ex-boyfriend was a photographer, so when he took the nude portraits of her before they began dating, they had a written contract stipulating that she would have final say over how the photos would be used or shared. When he violated the contract, Karla felt her privacy had been invaded and that using the photos for a malicious purpose took away her agency:

It's not that I'm ashamed of the pictures or embarrassed, or thought they were unflattering, or thought that they were too explicitly sexual or anything like that, it was the fact that I didn't have control over who they were distributed to and that they were distributed for a malicious purpose. Like it was to faculty members in my program and my [new] boyfriend's faculty, and it was clearly targeted to shine a negative light on me, and like, if those same pictures had been put up in an art gallery with my permission, I would have been fine with it, and any member of the public who wanted to could have walked in there and seen them, but to me it was the fact that they were used maliciously and without my consent, and in my name, that was the part that violated me the most I think. (Karla)

The loss of control over one's body was a particularly violating aspect of revenge porn, similar to sexual assault. Frazier (2003) found that when sexual assault survivors perceived a loss of control, they experienced more distress and trauma. Loss of control in Frazier's study was comprised of three categories: past (e.g., loss of control during the sexual assault), present (e.g., loss of control regarding police investigation, loss of control over the recovery process), and future (e.g., control over revictimization). Many participants experienced all three of these types of loss of control when they were victimized by revenge porn. Walsh and Bruce (2011) also examined sexual assault survivors' perceptions of control, and found that a survivor's perceived loss of control was related to distress.

Coping Mechanisms

Participants reported utilizing many coping mechanisms to alleviate feelings of distress and other emotions. Generally, participants engaged in more negative coping

mechanisms closer to when they were victimized, and gradually shifted to more positive ones as time passed. This section is comprised of two subthemes: (a) negative coping mechanisms and (b) positive coping mechanisms. Some of the coping mechanisms participants used overlap with the previous section about mental health, as the coping mechanisms were often in response to issues such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

Subtheme 1: "I drank a lot in the beginning": Negative coping mechanisms. Negative coping mechanisms ranged in behaviors, such as avoidance, denial, excessive drinking of alcohol, and obsessing, over one's victimization. In terms of avoidance/denial, participants attempted to avoid thinking about revenge porn and pretended they had not been victimized. Piper and Tasha mentioned how they initially refused to talk about revenge porn with others. Judith moved halfway across the country, partly to avoid her ex-boyfriend. As they worked and studied in the same department at their university and he had just returned from a month-long vacation, she did not want to interact with him at school/work after his return. She was thankful that shortly after he blackmailed her with a secretly recorded sex tape, he left on vacation, but during the few months they still had to work together in the same building, she avoided going to any meetings or activities she knew he would attend:

I stopped going to [departmental] meetings, I stopped going to my [other on-campus] job meetings because I knew he would be there, but after he left I could start going again, and then as he got back I left . . . But yeah, I avoided things I would have gone to normally like grad movie nights and things because I knew I could expect to see him there and I wasn't up for that. (Judith)

Some participants turned to alcohol to cope with the stress of revenge porn. Sacha "drank a lot in the beginning" before moving on to healthier coping mechanisms. Emma used a lot of "self-medicating" to help deal with the trauma. She mentioned,

That first summer when everything was so intense, oh my god, did I drink a lot. A lot. I was doing a lot of self-medicating just to put myself in a place where I was numb rather than just fearful and angry all the time. (Emma)

Emma also moved on to healthier coping mechanisms after time passed, when she came to the realization that if she did not stop drinking, she would drink herself "into oblivion." Excessive drinking is a common coping mechanism among sexual assault survivors as well. Sturza and Campbell (2005) found that sexual assault survivors were likely to take drugs and "self-medicate" to deal with trauma. Miranda, Meyerson, Long, Marx, and Simpson (2002) also found that women who had experienced a traumatic event, such as sexual assault, were more likely to drink excessively than women who had not faced a particularly traumatic experience.

Another coping mechanism discussed by participants was obsessing over why their ex-partner would harm them in such an intimate way, as well as obsessing over whether

their ex-partner would escalate the behavior. Participants did not understand why a person would commit such a cruel act against someone they had loved and trusted, which resulted in an obsession and need to understand why they were victimized. AnnMarie mentioned,

I needed to find out . . . what his motivation was, and . . . of course I wanted him to apologize. I wanted to hear remorse, I wanted to know that he was sorry, and I wasn't gonna get that.

Participants expressed an overwhelming need to understand why they were victimized and the motivations of the perpetrator involved with the revenge porn. Although beyond the scope of this project, future researchers should examine the motivations of men who post nonconsensual pornography online.

Jessica's ex-boyfriend shared their intimate photos with friends but to her knowledge he did not share them online. She spent a lot of time obsessing over his character and the kind of person he was when they were dating to reassure herself that it was unlikely he would post the photos online:

I definitely would try to think back to his character. I dated [him] for two and a half years. I would try and think like would he really post them anywhere... I kind of just used what I knew about his personality to reassure myself that . . . it wouldn't happen.
(Jessica)

Regina obsessed over reasons why her ex-husband would drug and rape her, let another man rape her, and send a video of it to the school board where she worked. She did "a lot of research" to figure out his motivations. She believed her ex-husband was a sociopath:

I did some research into "okay, what kind of a man does this?" you know, "what kind of mentality does an abuser have?" and the psychological workings of an abuser, and I truly believe that my ex-husband is a sociopath. (Regina)

Subtheme 2: "I wasn't alone": Positive coping mechanisms. Participants also engaged in various positive coping mechanisms to deal with their emotions. The most common were seeing a counselor or therapist, speaking out and helping others, relying on support systems such as family or friends, and focusing on moving on.

Counseling was helpful for most participants. Judith's counselor was the only person she told about being blackmailed with footage from a sex tape, so her counselor helped her work through her anxiety. Judith was also in her first year of graduate studies when she was blackmailed, so the combined pressures of graduate work and worrying about her ex-boyfriend sending a sex tape to her graduate supervisors left her feeling stressed and defeated. Regina found a counselor through a women's crisis center. She explained that having a counselor to talk to was more helpful than discussing her victimization with her friends and family:

The counselling was very helpful because as much as my family and my friends loved me . . . it's hard for them to understand abuse, and there's just so much judgment people put on the victim, and it's like I could go to my counsellor and it's like she understood. (Regina)

Participants also discussed speaking out about their experiences and helping others as a coping mechanism. Anisha believed that survivors should do everything possible to educate others about how horrendous revenge porn is, and became a Victim Outreach Worker for an organization that provides help to revenge porn survivors. Other participants became involved with policy and legal issues surrounding revenge porn. For example, AnnMarie testified in January 2014 in support of a bill to criminalize revenge porn in Maryland, which came into effect on October 1, 2014 (Maryland Code, s. 3-809). Claire talked about how a representative in Georgia emailed her to ask whether she would testify in support of a bill criminalizing revenge porn. She agreed to testify, though she had not heard back from the representative at the time of the interview. Gloria talked about participating in interviews with the press to publicize her story:

Well just recently actually, just like speaking with the press, doing interviews, which is nice, you get to advocate for a cause, and share your story and call attention to it . . . It's really just a matter of telling your story and making yourself heard, and you know, showing that it does happen to people, we do exist, there are victims of revenge porn, and we're all around you and we're upset. (Gloria)

As Regina lost her job after the video of her being raped was sent to her colleagues, she needed to find a new career path. She decided to go to law school because after she experienced such a traumatic event, she wanted to defend people who were wronged and help others as much as possible. She also talked about volunteering and her involvement with pro bono work at her law school to help women who were survivors of intimate partner violence:

There's a legal advocacy group here where I go to law school and I volunteer my time there, I do pro-bono work, I'm assigned to an attorney who does family law, and so I'm her law clerk, and so she handles cases of women who are needing to get divorced and there's been domestic violence. So . . . it's not necessarily revenge porn specifically, but we work with women who are victims of domestic violence. (Regina)

Support systems played a huge role in participants' lives and helped them feel safe after they were victimized. Participants expressed gratitude for their friends and family being there to support and help them in a time of need. Dawn mentioned, "just knowing I wasn't alone . . . helped . . . And talking to the couple people I felt safe to talk to." Furthermore, another coping mechanism participants discussed was attempting to live a "normal" life again. Regina mentioned how arduous dating was after her divorce with her ex-husband who raped her, but she did not want to live in fear because of the way she was treated in her marriage. She did not want her ex-husband to feel like he had "won":

I really just forced myself to do it because there was that part of me of you know, gosh darn it he's not gonna win. You know, if I hide in my house scared to go out, scared to live my life, because I'm scared of being hurt again, then that's exactly what he wants to happen, you know, he's still controlling me. And I was just obstinate enough that I wasn't gonna let that happen. (Regina)

After some initial struggles with dating and trying to trust men again, Regina met a partner she trusted and felt safe with, and was still dating him at the time of the interview despite many attempts from her ex-husband to break them up. Karla mentioned she initially refused to leave her house and go out in public after her ex-boyfriend sent naked photos of her to her professors. She kept the curtains shut and the windows closed, retreating to her home. She eventually realized her behavior was unhealthy, so she began to try and live a "normal" life.

Other positive coping mechanisms included seeking religion, writing, and smiling or laughing about what happened. Josephine became much more involved with her religion after she was threatened with naked photos, which she found helpful and therapeutic. Sarah began writing fiction to help herself de-stress, and AnnMarie wrote a manuscript about her experiences. Anisha mentioned that she often joked about being a revenge porn survivor to her friends to help lighten the mood, by making jokes such as "oh my god, how does it feel to be friends with a porn star?"

Some of the negative coping mechanisms used by participants in this study were similar to Cecil's (2014) argument regarding revenge porn survivors' coping mechanisms. Cecil suggested that many revenge porn survivors "completely alter their lives" after being victimized, which many participants in this study did. There are no studies examining positive coping mechanisms revenge porn survivors engage in. However, mechanisms used by participants such as speaking out and becoming involved with advocacy work may be empowering because it gives survivors a chance to show resistance against the institutions that continue to allow others to be victimized by revenge porn. When survivors have little or no legal recourse, they may find that speaking out and testifying to have bills passed is the only chance they have for their voices to be heard by individuals with power in society, which may provide a sense of agency when they are actively trying to prevent revenge porn from harming others.

Discussion and Conclusion

Every woman in this study experienced a horrendous invasion of sexual privacy and personal space, and in most cases at the hands of someone they loved and trusted. This study provided an analysis of the experiences of these survivors and how revenge porn forever changed and affected them. Under "mental health effects," participants discussed their experiences of trust issues, PTSD, anxiety, depression, loss of control, and how revenge porn affected their self-esteem. Under "negative coping mechanisms," participants' experiences of binge drinking, self-medication, denial, and obsession were in response to the negative mental health effects of revenge porn. Participants moved on to more positive coping mechanisms as time moved forward, including

counseling, becoming involved with advocacy work, relying on support systems, and trying to live a “normal” life.

The negative mental health consequences of revenge porn for female survivors are similar in nature to the negative mental health outcomes that rape survivors experience. Rape survivors frequently experience PTSD, anxiety, and depression, all of which participants in this study experienced. In terms of coping mechanisms, participants engaged in avoidance/denial and self-medication in attempt to avoid feelings of despair and distress regarding their victimization. These coping mechanisms are commonly found among rape survivors as well (Boeschen et al., 2001; Campbell, 2008).

The characteristics of revenge porn are similar to other sexual crimes (Bloom, 2014). As mentioned above, participants in the present study experienced a variety of negative mental health effects that sexual assault survivors also experience (Boeschen et al., 2001; Campbell, 2008; Littleton & Henderson, 2009; Monroe et al., 2005). Furthermore, sexual assault survivors report that the loss of control over their bodies and their own sexual agency contributes to their feelings of stress, anxiety, and distress (Frazier, 2003). The loss of control participants in the present study experienced contributed to feelings of anxiety and despair, and was a major facet of why revenge porn was so violating. One noteworthy example of this was found in Karla’s story, when she revealed that if the nude portraits of her had been put up in an art gallery with her permission, she “would have been fine with it,” but because she did not have a choice in her ex-boyfriend sharing the photos with others she felt extremely violated and upset. Overall, findings of this study reveal striking similarities between the mental health effects of sexual assault and revenge porn for survivors, suggesting that revenge porn should indeed be classified as a sexual offense as Bloom (2014) recommended. Therefore, the two primary conclusions to take away from this study include the following: (a) The mental health effects of revenge porn and sexual victimization are similar among victims; and (b) because of these striking similarities, revenge porn should be classified as a sexual offense, treatment strategies for survivors of revenge porn should be similar to effective treatment strategies used for survivors of other forms of sexual victimization, and legislators should consider the similarities between revenge porn and sexual crimes when making legal changes to the status of revenge porn and drafting legislation.

Although many states and other countries have begun to criminalize nonconsensual pornography, there were no laws in place at the time each of the participants in the present study were victimized, except for one participant whose ex-boyfriend was convicted under her state’s revenge porn law. Currently, there are 28 U.S. states with legislation regarding nonconsensual pornography, though each state’s legislation is different (Goldberg, 2016). For example, Alaska’s nonconsensual pornography law is classified as “harassment in the second degree,” whereas New Jersey’s legislation is “invasion of privacy, third degree” (Goldberg, 2016). In Canada, nonconsensual pornography is a criminal offense that is punishable by up to 5 years in prison (Criminal Code, s. 162.1(1)(a)). In the United Kingdom, nonconsensual pornography is covered under section 33 of the *2015 Criminal Justice and Courts Act* and is punishable by up to 2 years in prison. Given the outcomes of this study connecting revenge porn and sexual assault, perhaps an effective tool for legislators would be to treat revenge porn and nonconsensual pornography as sexual offenses. Future studies should examine

how the new laws regarding nonconsensual pornography have affected survivors' experiences, as well as their effectiveness in reducing incidences of nonconsensual pornography postings online.

It must be noted that although legislation criminalizing nonconsensual pornography does provide an avenue to punish offenders, it may not be effective in stopping offenders from posting nonconsensual pornography online or providing justice to survivors. As non-consensual pornography is similar in many ways to sexual assault, women reporting non-consensual pornography to the police may be treated similar to women who report sexual assault. In other words, women reporting nonconsensual pornography may experience victim-blaming from law enforcement and not be taken seriously. In addition, race and class may also effect the treatment of women reporting revenge porn to the police. Future studies should examine survivors' experiences with law enforcement to understand how race/class contribute to their experiences reporting revenge porn, as well as whether police officers engage in victim-blaming when women make reports of revenge porn.

It is clear that revenge porn leaves survivors feeling the same way that many sexual assault survivors do after victimization. Criminally, nonconsensual pornography should be classified as a sexual offense, unlike many of the current nonconsensual pornography laws that fall under other classifications. Feminist researchers should further explore the similarities between sexual assault and nonconsensual pornography to continue to strengthen theoretical arguments connecting revenge porn and sexual assault, and to help with effective strategies for providing help and assistance to nonconsensual pornography survivors.

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Note

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals.

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