

**Image-based sexual abuse among young people: The experiences and perspectives of  
victims, perpetrators, and bystanders**

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## **Abstract**

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) involves the taking or sharing (including threats to share) of intimate (i.e., nude or sexual) images (i.e., photographs and/or videos) of another person without their consent. Although a growing body of research has examined the consensual sexting behaviors (i.e., the sending of intimate images) of youth, little research has examined young people's experiences of IBSA (or 'non-consensual sexting' behaviors). This chapter presents survey findings relating to the IBSA and intimate image sharing experiences of 293 Australian youth, aged between 16 and 20 years. The youth represent a subsample of 4,053 Australian residents, aged between 16 and 49 years, who responded to a larger survey developed as part of a research grant examining experiences of IBSA. The study is the first of its kind to examine the experiences of young people from victim, perpetrator and bystander perspectives; although it is important to acknowledge that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive (i.e., the same respondents may have been victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders). Overall, 1 in 4 respondents had been victims of IBSA, 1 in 10 had been perpetrators of IBSA, and 1 in 2 had been bystanders of intimate image sharing. The taking of intimate images was the most frequently reported form of IBSA for both victims and perpetrators, followed by the sharing of, and threats to share, intimate images. With regard to bystanders, the showing of intimate images was the most frequent form of intimate image sharing, followed by the sending of intimate images. These findings are discussed with respect to the need to challenge the current victim-blaming and harm minimization rhetoric associated with IBSA and intimate image sharing, particularly in the youth context.

## **Introduction**

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) involves the taking or sharing (including threats to share) of intimate (i.e., nude or sexual) images (i.e., photographs and/or videos) of another person without their consent. Although a growing body of research has examined the consensual sexting behaviors (i.e., the sending of intimate images) of youth, little research has specifically examined the extent and nature of IBSA (or the ‘non-consensual sexting’ behaviors) of young people. This chapter presents survey findings relating to the IBSA and intimate image sharing experiences of 293 Australian youth, aged between 16 and 20 years. The study is the first of its kind to examine the experiences of young people from victim, perpetrator and bystander perspectives, although it is important to acknowledge that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive (i.e., the same respondents may have been victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders). In the context of this chapter, victims comprise respondents who reported having intimate images of themselves taken, shared, and/or threatened to be shared without their consent. Perpetrators comprise respondents who reported having taken, shared, and/or threatened to share intimate images of another person without their consent. Bystanders comprise respondents who reported having been shown and/or sent intimate images of another person.

This chapter briefly reviews the relevant literature relating to interpersonal violence, technology-mediated sexual interaction (TMSI), and IBSA. It then examines the extent and nature of IBSA and intimate image sharing among Australian youth, before exploring the impacts and fears of victims, the motivations of perpetrators, and the reactions of bystanders. Finally, it discusses the findings with respect to the need to challenge the current victim-blaming and harm minimization rhetoric associated with IBSA and intimate image sharing, particularly in the youth context.

## Literature Review

### Interpersonal violence

Interpersonal violence among young people is a pervasive problem that is well documented in the existing research literature. For example, Ybarra, Espelage, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Korchmaros, and Boyd (2016) examined youth (aged between 14 and 17 years) experiences of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in the United States. They found that between 10% and 26% of females, and between 7% and 26% of males, had experienced physical dating abuse; and that between 11% and 15% of females, and between 3% and 12% of males, had experienced sexual dating abuse. Similarly, Barter et al. (2017) examined young people's (aged between 14 and 17 years) experiences of interpersonal violence and abuse across five European countries. They found that between 9% and 22% of females, and between 8% and 15% of males, had experienced physical violence; and that between 31% and 59% of females, and between 19% and 41% of males, had experienced face-to-face emotional violence. With regard to online emotional violence, approximately 40% of males and females had experienced this form of violence.

A recent meta-analysis of 96 studies examined adolescent (aged between 13 and 18 years) dating violence and found that the prevalence of physical dating violence ranged from 1% to 61%, with an average of 20% (Wincentak, Connolly, & Card, 2017). Overall, females were more likely to report being perpetrators of physical dating violence, but there were no gender differences in victimization. Using a subsample of 31 studies, they found that the prevalence of sexual dating violence ranged from less than 1% to 54%, with an average of 9%. Overall, males were more likely to report being perpetrators of sexual dating violence, and females were more likely to report being victims of sexual dating violence (Wincentak et al., 2017).

Given the prevalence of online emotional violence and the increasing capacity (and therefore potential) for digital technology to be used to perpetrate violence, it is important to consider young people's use of technology. For example, Sudan, Olsen, Sigsgaard, and Kheifets (2016) examined trends in mobile phone use in Denmark and found that 37% of children aged 7 years used mobile phones, compared with 94% of children aged 11 years. Furthermore, research by the International Telecommunications Union (2017) found that young people (aged between 15 and 24 years) from developed countries were more likely to use the internet than the population as a whole (94% vs. 81%). Research also suggests that technology is increasingly becoming a 'ubiquitous element' of young people's lives (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). For example, the PEW Research Center found that the percentage of adolescents (aged between 13 and 17 years) with access to a smartphone increased from 73% in 2014/2015 to 95% in 2018 (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Lenhart, 2015). Furthermore, the number of adolescents who described themselves as being online 'almost constantly' increased from 24% to 45% over the same time period.

### **Technology-mediated sexual interaction**

TMSI refers to any form of interpersonal interaction where self-created, sexually explicit content (messages and/or images) is exchanged using digital technology (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017). 'Sexting' represents a highly prevalent form of TMSI and refers to the taking and sharing of intimate messages and/or images via mobile phones or social media (Powell & Henry, 2014).

According to Symons, Ponnet, Walrave, and Heirman (2018), sexting plays an increasing role in young people's sexual development. A recent systematic review of 29 studies examined

the experiences of adolescents and young adults (aged between 10 and 30 years) who engaged in TMSI across Australia, Europe, South Korea, and the United States (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017). The review found that between 1% and 31% of adolescents and young adults reported sending sexually explicit images of themselves to another person, and that between 17% and 49% reported receiving sexually explicit images from another person. A more recent survey of adolescents (aged between 14 and 17 years) across five European countries found that between 6% and 44% of females, and between 15% and 32% of males, reported sending a sexual message or image to a partner (Stanley et al., 2018). Stanley et al. also found that between 9% and 49% of females, and between 20% and 47% of males, reported receiving a sexual message or image from a partner. A similar pattern was found by Reed, Boyer, Meskunas, Tolman, and Ward (2020) in their study of adolescents' (aged between 13 and 19 years) sexting experiences in dating relationships. They found that females were more likely to report having sent intimate images, but that males were more likely to report having received intimate images.

Research has highlighted the normative nature of TMSI and sexting, with many young people describing their experiences as a common, normal, and safe way to relieve sexual tensions, to flirt and/or to provide sexual stimulation (Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2016; Stanley et al., 2018; Yeung, Horyniak, Vella, Hellard, & Lim, 2014). Motivations for sexting are generally positive, and research suggests that the sharing of sexually explicit content can be beneficial for young people. For example, sexting is often motivated by the desire to have fun or to flirt with another person (Reed et al., 2020). Furthermore, Drouin, Coupe, and Temple (2017) found that 57% of students (average age of 20 years) believed that sexting had a positive impact on their sexual and emotional relationships.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that a number of studies suggest females experience fewer positive, and more negative, emotional responses to the sending and receiving of sexts than males (Del Rey, Ojeda, Casas, Mora-Merchán, & Elipe, 2019; Gassó, Klettke, Agustina, & Montiel, 2019; Reed et al., 2020). Individual characteristics, and the wider social context, have also been shown to influence young people's emotional responses to, and engagement with, TMSI and sexting. For example, Reed et al. (2020) found that young people's emotional responses to sexting differed according to age, religiosity, self-sexualization, attachment avoidance and anxiety, and peer norms. Furthermore, research has shown that young people's pornography use, and perceptions of peer norms regarding sexting, influence their engagement with sexting (Maheux et al., 2020; Symons et al., 2018). Finally, several studies have reported associations between sexting and anxiety and depression, although these associations appear to weaken with age (Gassó et al., 2019; Mori, Temple, Browne, & Madigan, 2019).

### **Image-based sexual abuse**

The taking and sharing of sexual images is not a new phenomenon, but the increasing capacity of technology and opportunity for TMSI are associated with concerns regarding the safety of young people (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Powell & Henry, 2014). Specifically, concerns about how easy it is to take and share intimate images of a person without their consent, and how difficult it is to remove such images from digital platforms (Powell & Henry, 2014; Powell, Henry, & Flynn, 2018). It is important to acknowledge, however, that while TMSI and sexting may increase the risk of intimate images being shared without consent, they are not a necessary prerequisite. The non-consensual taking (e.g., up-skirting, down-blousing, toileting)

and creation (e.g., photoshopping) of intimate images, mean that young people may experience the non-consensual sharing of intimate images even though they have not engaged in the consensual taking or sharing of intimate images. Although the mainstream media often use the term ‘revenge pornography’, this chapter uses the term IBSA because it offers a more accurate and inclusive terminology for the taking and sharing (including threats to share) of intimate images of another person without their consent (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017; Powell et al., 2018).

### ***Extent and nature of image-based sexual abuse and intimate image sharing***

One of the first large-scale surveys to examine adolescent and adult (aged between 16 and 49 years) experiences of IBSA was conducted in Australia (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017; Powell, Henry, Flynn, & Scott, 2019). Henry et al. (2017) found that 23% of respondents reported being a victim of at least one form of IBSA: 20% reported being a victim of the non-consensual taking of intimate images, 11% reported being a victim of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and 9% reported being a victim of threats to share intimate images. Although victimization rates were similar for males and females, younger respondents were more likely to report being a victim of IBSA (29% for respondents aged between 16 and 29 years) than older respondents (20% for respondents aged between 30 and 49 years). In the majority of instances, respondents reported that the perpetrator was male and someone they had known previously (Henry et al., 2017).

Further research examined the victimization experiences of college students (average age of 19 years) and found that 10% reported having an intimate image shared with someone beyond the intended recipient, often by a current or former partner (Branch, Hilinski-Rosick, Johnson, &



Solano, 2017). Similarly, a recent meta-analysis of 39 studies found a prevalence rate of 8% for young people (under the age of 18 years) having been victims of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018).

With regard to perpetration, Powell et al. (2019) found that 11% of respondents reported being a perpetrator of at least one form of IBSA: 9% reported being a perpetrator of the non-consensual taking of intimate images, 6% reported being a perpetrator of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and 5% reported being a perpetrator of threats to share intimate images. In contrast to victimization rates, males (14%) were more likely to report being a perpetrator of IBSA than females (7%). In the majority of instances, respondents reported that the victim was female and someone they had known previously (Powell et al., 2019).

Further research found that 23% of adults (aged between 21 and 75 years) who had received intimate images, and 19% of adults (aged between 18 and 55 years) who had received private sexts, reported sharing them with other people without their consent (Clancy, Klettke, & Hallford, 2019; Garcia et al., 2016). Garcia et al. (2016) also found that males (25%) were more likely than females (20%) to report the nonconsensual sharing of intimate images, and that those who did share intimate images, shared them with an average of more than three other people (ranging from 1 to 25 other people). Finally, the aforementioned recent meta-analysis found a prevalence rate of 12% for young people (under the age of 18 years) having been perpetrators of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Madigan et al., 2018).

Although less attention has been given to the extent and nature of bystanders of intimate image sharing, Hudson, Fetro, and Ogletree (2014) found that 64% of undergraduate students (predominantly aged between 18 and 19 years), reported having a private intimate image shared with them. Fleschler Peskin et al. (2013) found a lower prevalence rate with school children

(average age of 16 years), whereby 18% reported having a private intimate image shared with them. Interestingly, nearly a third of their respondents reported being both perpetrators of, and bystanders to, non-consensual intimate image sharing.

### ***Impacts and fears of victims***

Henry et al. (2017) found that the majority of adolescent and adult respondents who had experienced IBSA victimization had experienced levels of psychological distress that equated to a moderate to severe diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety disorder (taken: 67%, shared: 75%, threatened: 80%). Respondents who had experienced IBSA victimization also reported being fearful for their safety (taken: 28%, shared: 39%, threatened: 46%), with females more likely than males to report being fearful (Henry et al., 2017). Furthermore, a qualitative study with 38 female adults (aged between 18 and 44 years) found that all victims experienced negative emotional responses when they discovered that they had been victims of IBSA (Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017). Common emotional responses included anger, embarrassment, and shame. These victims also reported being anxious and fearful during and after the abuse, particularly with regard to the possibility of the intimate images resurfacing. Other impacts included lost friendships, reduced social media presence, and the need to take time off from school or work, or to leave school or work altogether (Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017). Similarly, research has shown that young people often experience negative emotional responses as a consequence of having intimate messages and/or images shared without their consent. For example, Stanley et al. (2018) found that 61% of females (aged between 14 and 17 years) who reported negative impacts of sexting had experienced a message being shared without their consent. In addition,

Branch et al. (2017) found that 54% of college students felt angry at the person who shared the intimate images, and 33% felt angry at themselves for initially sending the intimate images.

### ***Motivations of perpetrators***

Clancy et al. (2019) found that the most common reasons for sharing private sext messages were that it was not a big deal and that it was a joke. Other motivations included: to get attention, to improve social status, in response to a request, in response to feeling pressured, and to get the recipient of the message in trouble. Overall, there were no gender differences in motivations to perpetrate IBSA, with the exception that males were more likely than females to be motivated by a desire to improve their social status (Clancy et al., 2019). Further research has analyzed the posts of male perpetrators on revenge pornography websites to examine how they justify the posting of intimate images. For example, Hall and Hearn (2019) found that all posts contained an element of victim blaming, and that the posting of intimate images was a form of ‘retaliation’ for some past misdemeanor (e.g., infidelity) by their (ex)partner. They also suggested that the posting of intimate images allowed these male perpetrators to overcompensate, protect their manhood, and hurt the female (ex)partners they felt wronged by.

### ***Reactions of bystanders***

The experiences and perspectives of bystanders have received much less attention in the research literature than those of victims and perpetrators. However, a recent qualitative study with 25 young adults (aged between 18 and 25 years) examined bystanders’ experiences of viewing intimate images when they were not the intended recipient (Harder, 2020). Harder found that bystanders often experienced mixed feelings because of the excitement of seeing the

intimate images and the moral obligation they felt towards the person in the images. Bystanders found these experiences weird or awkward, but generally did not want to risk challenging the group dynamics by saying anything. This reluctance was less apparent for females than males, with female bystanders being more likely to express their condemnation (Harder, 2020). These gender differences echo those of a previous quantitative study that reported on adolescents' (aged between 11 and 18 years) experiences of secondary sexting (i.e., forwarding images of others or being forwarded images of others; Del Rey et al., 2019). Del Rey et al. found that males were more likely than females to report positive emotional impacts of secondary sexting whereas females were more likely than males to report negative emotional impacts.

### **Current study**

It is apparent from the research literature presented, that further research is needed to increase knowledge regarding young people's experiences and perspectives of IBSA and intimate image sharing. Young people represent a vulnerable group due to their extensive engagement with technology, both generally and when engaging in TMSI, their developing sexual identities, and their greater rates of IBSA victimization compared to adults (Gassó et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2017). The current study explores the IBSA and intimate image sharing experiences of 293 Australian youth, aged between 16 and 20 years, and is the first of its kind to examine the experiences of young people from victim, perpetrator and bystander perspectives. Specifically, it examines 1) the extent and nature of IBSA and intimate image sharing, 2) the impacts and fears of victims of IBSA, 3) the motivations of perpetrators of IBSA, and 4) the reactions of bystanders of intimate image sharing. Consideration will also be given to whether

there are any gender differences in young people's experiences of IBSA and intimate image sharing.

## **Methods**

### **Respondents and Procedure**

This chapter reports on a sample of 293 Australian youth, aged between 16 and 20 years, who represent a subsample of the 4,053 residents, aged between 16 and 49 years, who responded to a larger survey developed as part of a research grant examining experiences of IBSA (see Henry, Flynn, & Powell, 2019; Henry et al., 2017). The survey was administered online, responses were anonymous, and respondents received a small monetary payment for completing the survey. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

---Table 1 about here---

Respondents were recruited by Research Now, a global online sampling and data collection company, who distributed emails to panel members who resided in Australia. Quota sampling was used to ensure that the sample was reasonably representative of the Australian population (as per the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data) for certain key characteristics (gender, age, sexuality). All respondents were presented with an information letter before providing their informed consent and a debrief statement after completing the survey. They were informed that the survey examined attitudes and experiences of sex, technology, and relationships. The research was approved by a university human ethics committee following the guidelines prescribed by the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

## **Measures**

Respondents completed an online survey that comprised a series of measures relating to their demographic characteristics, as well as their experiences of IBSA and intimate image sharing from victim, perpetrator, and bystander perspectives. The measures reported in this chapter are described below.

### ***Demographic characteristics***

Respondents were asked their: gender (female, male), age (in years), sexuality (heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual), indigeneity (non-Indigenous, Indigenous), and highest level of education (high school or less, trade certificate, university/college, postgraduate/advanced degree).

### ***Extent and nature of image-based sexual abuse and intimate image sharing***

Respondents were asked whether they had ever (since the age of 16 years): 1) had intimate images of themselves taken, shared, and/or threatened to be shared without their consent (victim); 2) taken, shared, and/or threatened to share intimate images of another person without their consent (perpetrator); and 3) been shown or sent intimate images of another person (bystander). Eight items related to the content of the images for each form of IBSA and intimate image sharing. Specifically, whether the person in the images: 1) was partially clothed or semi-nude, 2) had their breasts, including nipples, visible, 3) was completely nude, 4) had their genitals visible, 5) was engaged in a sex act, 6) was showering, bathing or toileting, and whether the images were: 7) up a skirt (upskirting), and 8) of cleavage (down-blousing). All items were measured via single answer (yes, no) multiple choice questions. For the purpose of analysis,

eight composite measures were created for each form of IBSA and intimate image sharing ('any intimate images' in Table 2).

Respondents who reported being victims of IBSA were asked about the gender of (male, female, both male and female, don't know), and their connection to (intimate partner or ex-partner, family member, friend, stranger, acquaintance, or don't know their identity), the perpetrator(s) for each form of IBSA. Similarly, respondents who reported being perpetrators of IBSA were asked about the gender of, and their connection to, the victim(s) for each form of IBSA. All items were measured via single answer (select the choice that applies) multiple choice questions. For the purpose of analysis, four composite measures were created for the gender and connection items across all three forms of IBSA. Respondents who reported being bystanders of intimate image sharing were asked whether they believed the person in the images had given their permission for each form of intimate image sharing. Both items were measured via single answer (yes because from commercial pornography, yes because I know the person gave permission, no I don't think the person gave permission, I don't know) multiple choice questions. For the purpose of analysis, one composite measure was created for the permission item across both forms of intimate image sharing.

### ***Impacts and fears of victims***

Respondents who had been victims of IBSA were asked about their most recent experiences of having intimate images of themselves taken, shared, and/or threatened to be shared, specifically the impacts and their fears. Three items related to the impacts of each form of IBSA, and whether the experiences negatively impacted upon their: 1) work or study performance, 2) relationships with friends and family, and 3) relationship with an intimate

partner. Four items related to their fears regarding each form of IBSA, and whether they feared the discovery of the images by: 1) friends and family, 2) a current or future employer, 3) a current or future intimate partner, and 4) current or future children. All items were measured via five-point scales ranging from 1 'not at all' to 5 'extremely' and were collapsed to create dichotomous 'yes' (4 and 5) and 'no' (1 to 3) responses. For the purpose of analysis, seven composite measures were created for the fears and impacts of victims across all three forms of IBSA ('all forms' in Table 3).

### ***Motivations of perpetrators***

Respondents who had been perpetrators of IBSA were asked about their most recent experiences of taking, sharing, and/or threatening to share intimate images of another person, specifically their motivations. Nine items related to their motivations for each form of IBSA, and whether they believed it was: 1) funny, 2) sexy or flirty, and whether they desired to 3) get back at the person, 4) impress friends, 5) embarrass the person, 6) control the person, 7) humiliate the person, 8) trade the images for other images, and 9) trade the images for money. All items were measured via multiple answer (select all choices that apply), multiple choice questions. For the purpose of analysis, nine composite measures were created for the motivations of perpetrators across all three forms of IBSA ('all forms' in Table 4).

### ***Reactions of bystanders***

Respondents who had been bystanders of intimate image sharing were asked about their most recent experiences of being shown or sent intimate images of another person, specifically their reactions. Six items related to their reactions to each form of intimate image sharing, and



whether they: 1) felt uncomfortable, 2) felt embarrassed, 3) were bothered but did not say anything, 4) were okay with it, 5) were bothered and said something, and 6) thought it was funny. All items were measured via five-point scales ranging from 1 ‘not at all’ to 5 ‘extremely’, and were collapsed to create dichotomous ‘yes’ (4 and 5) and ‘no’ (1 to 3) responses. For the purpose of analysis, six composite measures were created for the reactions of bystanders across both forms of IBSA (‘both forms’ in Table 5).

## **Analysis**

Descriptive analyses were performed to examine the extent and nature of IBSA and intimate image sharing, as well as the impacts and fears of victims, the motivations of perpetrators, and the reactions of bystanders. Chi-square analyses were also performed to explore whether there were any significant gender differences in the extent of IBSA and intimate image sharing, the nature of intimate image sharing, and the reactions of bystanders. Unfortunately, small sample sizes precluded chi-square analyses from being performed for the nature of IBSA, the impacts and fears of victims, and the motivations of perpetrators. However, potentially noteworthy gender differences (i.e., differences of 10.0% or more with a minimum of a small effect size) are reported given the exploratory nature of the current study. Effect size was measured using phi ( $\phi$ ) for analyses involving two dichotomous variables and Cramer’s V ( $\phi_c$ ) for analyses involving one dichotomous variable and one non-dichotomous variable. The analyses used the eight composite measures for the extent of IBSA and intimate image sharing, the five composite measures for the nature of IBSA and intimate image sharing, the seven composite measures for the impacts and fears of victims, the nine composite measures for the motivation of perpetrators, and the six composite measures for the reactions of bystanders.

Significant and noteworthy gender differences are reported in the text (% , n), with the associated test statistics (chi-square analyses only) and effect sizes.

## **Results**

### **Extent and nature of image-based sexual abuse and intimate image sharing**

Overall, 28.3% (n=83) of respondents reported being victims of IBSA, 9.9% (n=29) reported being perpetrators of IBSA, and 48.5% (n=142) reported being bystanders of intimate image sharing. However, it is important to acknowledge that the victim, perpetrator and bystander groups were not mutually exclusive. For example, 74.7% (n=62) of respondents who reported being victims of IBSA were also perpetrators of IBSA and/or bystanders of intimate image sharing; 96.6% (n=28) of respondents who reported being perpetrators of IBSA were also victims of IBSA and/or bystanders of intimate image sharing; and 47.2% (n=67) of respondents who reported being bystanders of intimate image sharing were also victims and/or perpetrators of IBSA. Table 2 presents the extent of IBSA and intimate image sharing behaviors across the victim, perpetrator, and bystander groups.

---Table 2 about here---

Table 2 shows that respondents were most likely to report being bystanders of intimate image sharing (shown: 44.4%, n=130, sent: 22.2%, n=65) and least likely to report being perpetrators of IBSA (taken: 7.8%, n=23, shared: 5.5%, n=16, threatened: 3.4% n=10). With regard to the different forms of IBSA and intimate image sharing, respondents who reported being victims of IBSA were most likely to have had images taken (22.5%, n=66), respondents

who reported being perpetrators of IBSA were most likely to have taken images (7.8%, n=23), and respondents who reported being bystanders of intimate image sharing were most likely to have been shown images (44.4%, n=130). Chi-square analyses of the eight composite measures (any intimate image sharing) revealed that there were no significant gender differences in the extent of IBSA or intimate image sharing across any of the victim, perpetrator or bystander groups.

Respondents who reported being victims of IBSA were most likely to be targeted by male perpetrators (53.0%, n=44), followed by female perpetrators (24.1%, n=20). The remaining 22.9% (n=19) of respondents were targeted by both male and female perpetrators or did not know the gender of the perpetrators. The vast majority of respondents were targeted by people they had previous close relationships with (81.9%, n=28), such as intimate partners or ex-partners, family members and/or friends. Comparatively, few were targeted by strangers, acquaintances, multiple perpetrators, or perpetrators with whom they did not know the identity (18.1%, n=15). Analyses of the two victim composite measures revealed that the gender of, and respondents' connection to, the perpetrator(s) of IBSA were similar irrespective of respondents' gender.

Respondents who reported being perpetrators of IBSA were most likely to target female victims (44.8%, n=13), followed by male victims (31.0%, n=9). The remaining 24.1% (n=7) of respondents targeted both male and female victims or did not know the gender of their victims. The vast majority of respondents targeted people they had previous close relationships with (75.9%, n=22), and comparatively few respondents targeted strangers, acquaintances, multiple victims or victims with whom they did not know the identity (24.1%, n=7). Analyses of the two perpetrator composite measures revealed two noteworthy, but non-significant, gender

differences. Males were more likely than females to target female victims (60.0%, n=6 vs. 36.8%, n=7), whereas females were more likely than males to target both male and female victims or to not know the gender of their victims (31.6%, n=6 vs. 10.0%, n=1;  $\phi_c = .266$ ). In addition, males were more likely than females to target strangers or victims with whom they did not know the identity (20.0%, n=2 vs. 10.5%, n=2), whereas females were more likely than males to target multiple victims (15.8%, n=3 vs. 0.0%, n=0;  $\phi_c = .265$ ).

Finally, respondents who reported being bystanders of intimate image sharing were similarly likely to believe the person in the images had (33.1%, n=47) and had not (29.6%, n=42) given their permission. The remaining respondents believed some of the people in the images had given their permission whereas others had not (11.3%, n=16), or did not know if the person in the images had given their permission (26.1%, n=37). Chi-square analysis of the bystander composite measure revealed a statistically significant gender difference. Males were more likely than females to believe the person in the images had given their permission (51.2%, n=21 vs. 25.7%, n=26), whereas females were more likely than males to believe the person in the images had not given their permission (33.7%, n=34 vs. 9.5%, n=8), or to believe some of the people in the images had given their permission whereas others had not (14.9%, n=15 vs. 2.4%, n=1;  $\chi^2 = 11.69, p = .009, \phi_c = .287$ ).

### **Impacts and fears of victims**

Respondents who reported being victims of IBSA experienced negative impacts on their work or study performance (25.3%, n=21), on their relationships with friends and family (21.7%, n=18), and on their relationship with an intimate partner (20.5%, n=17). Furthermore, respondents feared the images being discovered by friends and family (38.6%, n=32), by a

current or future employer (36.1%, n=30), by a current or future intimate partner (30.1%, n=25), and by their current or future children (30.1%, n=25). Table 3 presents the impacts and fears of victims across the different forms of IBSA.

---Table 3 about here---

Analyses of the three composite measures (all forms) revealed that IBSA had similar impacts on respondents irrespective of their gender. There was just one noteworthy, but non-significant, exception: females were more likely than males to experience negative impacts on their relationship with an intimate partner (24.6%, n=14 vs. 11.5%, n=3;  $\phi = -.150$ ). With regard to the fears of victims, analyses for the four composite measures (all forms) revealed that there were four noteworthy, but non-significant, gender differences. Females were more likely than males to fear the images being discovered by friends and family (42.1%, n=24 vs. 30.8%, n=8;  $\phi = -.108$ ), by a current or future employer (40.4%, n=23 vs. 26.9%, n=7;  $\phi = -.130$ ), by a current or future intimate partner (35.1%, n=20 vs. 19.2%, n=5;  $\phi = -.160$ ), and by their current or future children (36.8%, n=21 vs. 15.4%, n=4;  $\phi = -.217$ ).

### **Motivations of perpetrators**

Respondents who reported being perpetrators of IBSA, were most likely to be motivated by the belief that it was funny (37.9%, n=11) and/or sexy or flirty (34.5%, n=10), followed by the desire to get back at the person (27.6%, n=8) or impress friends (20.7%, n=6). Fewer respondents were motivated by the desire to embarrass (17.2%, n=5), control, or humiliate the person (both 13.8%, n=4). Fewer respondents still were motivated by the desire to trade the

images for other images (6.9%, n=2) or money (3.4%, n=1). Table 4 presents the motivations of perpetrators across the different forms of IBSA.

---Table 4 about here---

Analyses of the nine composite measures (all forms) revealed that there were four noteworthy, but non-significant, gender differences. Females were more likely than males to be motivated by the desire to get back at a person (31.6%, n=6 vs. 20.0, n=2;  $\phi = -.123$ ), to impress friends (26.3%, n=5 vs. 10.0, n=1;  $\phi = -.191$ ), and to control the person (21.1%, n=4 vs. 0%, n=0;  $\phi = -.290$ ). In contrast, males were more likely than females to be motivated by the desire to humiliate the person (30.0%, n=3 vs. 5.3%, n=1;  $\phi = .341$ ).

### **Reactions of bystanders**

Respondents who reported being bystanders of intimate image sharing were most likely to feel uncomfortable (43.7%, n=62) and/or embarrassed (39.4%, n=56). Fewer respondents were bothered but did not say something or were okay with it (both 31.0%, n=44). Fewer respondents still were bothered and said something (25.4%, n=36) or thought it was funny (14.8%, n=21).

Table 5 presents the reactions of bystanders across the different forms of intimate image sharing.

---Table 5 about here---

Chi-square analyses of the six composite measures (both forms) revealed that respondents' reactions to intimate image sharing were similar irrespective of their gender. There were just two

statistically significant exceptions: females were more likely than males to feel embarrassed (45.5%, n=46 vs. 24.4%, n=10;  $\chi^2 = 5.46, p = .019, \phi = -.196$ ), and males were more likely than females to find it funny (26.8%, n=11 vs. 9.9%, n=10;  $\chi^2 = 6.63, p = .010, \phi = .216$ ).

## Discussion

This chapter presents survey findings relating to the IBSA and intimate image sharing experiences of 293 Australian youth, aged between 16 and 20 years, from victim, perpetrator, and bystander perspectives. Specifically, it examined 1) the extent and nature of IBSA and intimate image sharing, 2) the impacts and fears of victims of IBSA, 3) the motivations of perpetrators of IBSA, and 4) the reactions of bystanders of intimate image sharing.

Overall, 1 in 4 respondents had been victims of IBSA, 1 in 10 had been perpetrators of IBSA, and 1 in 2 had been bystanders of intimate image sharing. The non-consensual taking of intimate images was the most frequent form of IBSA for both victims and perpetrators, followed by the sharing and threats to share intimate images. Bystanders were more likely to be shown, rather than sent, intimate images. There were no gender differences with regard to the extent of IBSA and intimate image sharing. These findings are generally consistent with previous research that has examined victimization (Branch et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2017; Madigan et al., 2018) and perpetration (Powell et al., 2019) rates with both adolescent and adult respondents. However, there were a few notable differences. For example, some of the perpetration rates reported by previous research for the non-consensual sharing of intimate images are considerably higher than those reported in the current study (Clancy et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2016). These discrepancies may reflect methodological differences. The current study only examined the non-consensual sending and uploading of intimate images, whereas previous research also examined the non-

consensual showing of intimate images. Irrespective, these findings highlight the need for educational programs to make it clear that all forms of non-consensual intimate image taking and sharing (including threats to share) are IBSA.

The lack of any gender differences in victimization rates is consistent with previous research with both adolescent and adult respondents (Henry et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2019). However, the lack of any gender differences in perpetration rates contrasts with previous research that has found perpetration rates to be higher for males compared to females (Garcia et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the perpetrators of respondents who reported being victims of IBSA were more likely to be male than female, and the victims of respondents who reported being perpetrators of IBSA were more likely to be female than male. In addition, most respondents who reported being victims and/or perpetrators were targeted by, or targeted, people they had previous close relationships with. These findings are consistent with previous research examining offline sexual violence (e.g., rape and sexual assault; Kelly, Lovett, & Regan, 2005) and IBSA (Henry et al., 2017; Powell et al., 2019). They also highlight the need for educational programs to teach young people about healthy intimate relationships and the importance of consent in the context of intimate image taking and sharing.

With regard to the impacts and fears of victims, about 1 in 4 respondents reported that IBSA victimization impacted upon their work or study performance, and about 1 in 5 reported that it impacted upon their relationships with friends, family, and intimate partners. Furthermore, about 1 in 3 respondents feared that the intimate images would be discovered by friends and family, as well as current or future employers, intimate partners, and children. These findings are consistent with previous research that found IBSA victimization impacted upon the school performance and relationships of young people and caused fear during and after the abuse



(Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017). However, the comparatively low frequencies for impacts and fears in the current study, compared with previous research (Henry et al., 2017; Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017), are concerning. They suggest that a proportion of youth do not consider the potential risks associated with intimate image sharing. It is important, therefore, that young people are made aware of these impacts and fears, and that schools, colleges, and universities develop processes to minimize the potential repercussions of IBSA.

Gender comparisons revealed that females were more likely than males to experience negative impacts on their relationship with an intimate partner and to fear that the intimate images would be discovered by friends and family, as well as current and future employers and children. These findings are consistent with previous research that found females tended to express more negative emotional responses to sexting than males (Del Rey et al., 2019; Gassó et al., 2019). They are also consistent with pervasive societal views that shame and judge females, but reward males, for their expressions of sexual desire and agency (Allen, 2005; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Powell, 2010).

With regard to the motivations of perpetrators, about 1 in 3 respondents reported that they thought it was funny, sexy, or flirty, and about 1 in 5 reported that they wanted to impress friends. Between about 1 in 10 and 1 in 5 respondents reported that they wanted to get back at, embarrass, control and/or humiliate the person. Finally, less than 1 in 10 respondents reported that they wanted to trade the images for other images or money. These findings are consistent with previous research (Clancy et al., 2019). Although it is possible that sexy and flirty motivations are a consequence of respondents rationalizing their behavior, it is also possible that a proportion of young people genuinely fail to comprehend the negative impacts of IBSA. For example, previous research has shown that motivations for IBSA often reflect a lack of

awareness regarding the severity of the behavior (Clancy et al., 2019). From an educational perspective, the latter interpretation of the findings is preferable because it should be easier to challenge frequently occurring ‘non-criminal’ motivations than less frequently occurring ‘criminal’ motivations. Finally, these findings support the view that ‘revenge pornography’ is an inadequate term because it fails to encompass the broad range of motivations associated with the non-consensual taking and sharing (including threats to share) of intimate images. In the current study, revenge was not the sole motivation, nor was it the most common.

Gender comparisons revealed that females were more likely than males to report perpetrating IBSA to impress friends, as well as to get back at and/or control the person. Males, by comparison, were more likely than females to report perpetrating IBSA to humiliate the person. These findings suggest motivations may vary according to gender. Therefore, further research needs to explore these and other potential group differences to better understand the underlying motivations for IBSA.

With regard to the reactions of bystanders, just under 1 in 2 respondents who received intimate images felt uncomfortable and just over 1 in 3 felt embarrassed. A similar proportion of respondents (about 1 in 3) were bothered but did not say something or were okay with it. Finally, about 1 in 4 respondents were bothered and said something, and about 1 in 7 thought it was funny. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests bystanders may not say anything because of the endorsement of peer norms and an aversion to challenging group dynamics (Harder, 2020). Therefore, further research needs to examine if and why bystanders of IBSA are reluctant to intervene. Particularly, given the important role, they may have in the prevention of this form of abuse.

It is interesting that only a small proportion of bystanders thought intimate image sharing was funny given that a large proportion of perpetrators believed IBSA was funny, sexy and/or flirty. From an educational perspective, it may be beneficial to encourage young people to engage in open and honest discussions about their thoughts regarding, and experiences of, receiving intimate images, especially non-consensually shared images. These discussions would not only highlight the importance of consent in the context of intimate image taking and sharing but also help challenge the social norms that minimize or condone IBSA (see Powell, 2014). Furthermore, it would be beneficial to provide practical advice about when and how to intervene.

Gender comparisons revealed that bystander reactions were generally similar irrespective of gender, although males were more likely to find incidents funny, and females were more likely to find incidents embarrassing. These findings are consistent with previous research (Del Rey et al., 2019) and suggest that males may be less likely to appreciate the potential negative impacts of IBSA. Further research is needed to better understand variations in young people's reactions so that educational programs can be tailored accordingly.

### **Implications, limitations, and further research**

It is encouraging that this chapter has been included in a book relating to interpersonal violence, as it represents an important step in recognizing that the non-consensual taking and sharing (including threats to share) of intimate images is a form of sexual violence rather than just 'revenge pornography' or 'sexting gone wrong'. The current study certainly suggests that the extent and nature of IBSA, as well as the impacts and fears of victims, are not adequately represented by either of these terms. Given that legislation and policy do not recognize IBSA as a form of sexual violence (McGlynn et al., 2017), being able to frame IBSA as part of the

continuum of sexual violence has important implications for the support offered to victims of this form of abuse. Framing IBSA in this way also helps ensure that educational programs, victim support services, and law and policy responses, are coherent and form part of the overall strategy to prevent sexual violence (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; McGlynn et al., 2017). It is vitally important that research continues to challenge the current victim-blaming and harm minimization rhetoric associated with IBSA and intimate image sharing. Instead, IBSA needs to be conceptualized as a breach of trust and a violation of sexual autonomy, for which the perpetrator, rather than the victim, is responsible (Bothamley & Tully, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge that the current study used a non-generalizable community subsample of Australian residents recruited via a global online sampling and data collection company. Although the original sample was substantial, the subsample of youth was limited. Consequently, it was not possible to explore intersectionality in young people's experiences of IBSA and intimate image sharing, and the gender comparisons presented in this chapter must be interpreted with caution. The limited sample also resulted in the experiences and perspectives of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders being examined separately. Finally, although the current study examined whether young people had been shown or sent intimate images it did not distinguish between images that had been shown or sent consensually or non-consensually. Consequently, it was not possible to examine the experiences and perspectives of bystanders of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images only. Further research is needed, therefore, to examine the range of intersectional contexts in which IBSA occurs, to unpack the interrelated nature of the different forms of IBSA, and to examine the experiences and perspectives of bystanders of IBSA.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings relating to the IBSA and intimate image sharing experiences of 293 Australian youth, aged between 16 and 20 years, from victim, perpetrator, and bystander perspectives. Overall, 1 in 4 respondents had been victims of IBSA, 1 in 10 had been perpetrators of IBSA, and 1 in 2 had been bystanders of intimate image sharing. Importantly, these groups are not mutually exclusive and the same respondents may have been victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders. These findings highlight the need for evidence-based educational programs that promote the development of healthy intimate relationships and challenge the non-consensual taking and sharing (including threats to share) of intimate images. Further research is needed to develop a more complete understanding of IBSA and intimate image sharing among young people to help prevent this form of abuse and the associated negative emotional responses.

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Table 1

*Demographic characteristics of the respondents*

	Victim group % ( <i>n</i> )	Perpetrator group % ( <i>n</i> )	Bystander group % ( <i>n</i> )	All respondents % ( <i>n</i> )
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	68.7 (57)	65.5 (19)	71.1 (101)	69.6 (204)
Male	31.3 (26)	35.5 (10)	28.9 (41)	30.4 (89)
<b>Age</b>				
Mean	18.19	18.24	18.02	18.18
<i>SD</i>	1.35	1.38	1.36	1.39
<b>Sexuality</b>				
Heterosexual	77.1 (64)	86.2 (25)	79.6 (113)	83.3 (244)
Lesbian, gay, bisexual	22.9 (19)	13.8 (4)	20.4 (29)	16.7 (49)
<b>Indigeneity</b>				
Non-Indigenous	92.8 (77)	86.2 (25)	95.8 (136)	96.9 (284)
Indigenous	7.2 (6)	13.8 (4)	4.2 (6)	3.1 (9)
<b>Education</b>				
Primary or secondary	68.7 (57)	69.0 (20)	78.9 (112)	78.2 (229)
Tertiary	31.3 (26)	31.0 (9)	11.3 (16)	21.8 (64)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0 (83)</b>	<b>100 (29)</b>	<b>100.0 (142)</b>	<b>100.0 (293)</b>

*Note.* The victim, perpetrator and bystander groups are not mutually exclusive (i.e., the same respondents may have been victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders).

Table 2

*Extent of image-based sexual abuse and intimate image sharing behaviors across the victim, perpetrator and bystander groups*

	Victim group			Perpetrator group			Bystander group	
	Taken	Shared	Threatened	Taken	Shared	Threatened	Shown	Sent
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Partially clothed or semi-nude	16.4 (48)	10.9 (32)	7.8 (23)	4.1 (12)	3.8 (11)	1.4 (4)	34.8 (102)	14.0 (41)
Breasts, including nipples, visible	4.8 (14)	2.4 (7)	3.8 (11)	3.4 (10)	1.4 (4)	1.4 (4)	24.6 (72)	10.2 (30)
Completely nude	5.5 (16)	2.4 (7)	2.0 (6)	3.1 (9)	2.0 (6)	1.0 (3)	18.8 (55)	8.5 (25)
Genitals visible	6.8 (20)	2.7 (8)	2.7 (8)	1.7 (5)	2.4 (7)	1.0 (3)	26.3 (77)	13.3 (39)
Sex act	7.2 (21)	3.4 (10)	3.4 (10)	1.4 (4)	2.0 (6)	1.0 (3)	12.6 (37)	5.5 (16)
Showering, bathing or toileting	8.9 (26)	4.1 (12)	2.7 (8)	3.1 (9)	0.3 (1)	1.4 (4)	15.0 (44)	4.8 (14)
Up a skirt (up-skirting)	4.4 (13)	2.0 (6)	0.7 (2)	2.0 (6)	0.3 (1)	1.4 (4)	7.2 (21)	3.1 (9)
Of cleavage (down-blousing)	8.5 (25)	4.1 (12)	1.7 (5)	1.7 (5)	1.0 (3)	1.0 (3)	16.4 (48)	3.4 (10)
Any intimate image sharing	22.5 (66)	13.3 (39)	9.6 (28)	7.8 (23)	5.5 (16)	3.4 (10)	44.4 (130)	22.2 (65)

*Note.* The victim, perpetrator, and bystander groups are not mutually exclusive (i.e., the same respondents may have reported being victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders).

Table 3

*Impacts and fears of victims across the different forms of image-based sexual abuse*

	Victim group				Gender	
	Taken (n=66) % (n)	Shared (n=39) % (n)	Threatened (n=28) % (n)	All forms (n=83) % (n)	Female (n=57) % (n)	Male (n=26) % (n)
<b>Impacts</b>						
Work or study performance	16.7 (11)	15.4 (6)	25.0 (7)	25.3 (21)	26.3 (15)	23.1 (6)
Relationships with friends and family	15.2 (10)	17.9 (7)	21.4 (6)	21.7 (18)	22.8 (13)	19.2 (5)
Relationship with an intimate partner	13.6 (9)	15.4 (6)	25.0 (7)	20.5 (17)	24.6 (14) <sup>†</sup>	11.5 (3)
<b>Fears</b>						
Discovered by friends and family	31.8 (21)	33.3 (13)	35.7 (10)	38.6 (32)	42.1 (24) <sup>†</sup>	30.8 (8)
Discovered by current or future employer	28.8 (19)	20.5 (8)	39.3 (11)	36.1 (30)	40.4 (23) <sup>†</sup>	26.9 (7)
Discovered by current or future intimate partner	18.2 (12)	30.8 (12)	42.9 (12)	30.1 (25)	35.1 (20) <sup>†</sup>	19.2 (5)
Discovered by current or future children	27.3 (18)	28.2 (11)	35.7 (10)	30.1 (25)	36.8 (21) <sup>†</sup>	15.4 (4)

*Note.* Respondents could select multiple impacts and fears, and the different forms of IBSA are not mutually exclusive (i.e., respondents may have had intimate images of themselves taken, shared, and/or threatened to be shared). <sup>†</sup> Difference of 10.0% or more with a minimum of a small effect size (i.e., a noteworthy gender difference).

Table 4

*Motivations of perpetrators across the different forms of image-based sexual abuse*

	Perpetrator group				Gender	
	Taken	Shared	Threatened	All forms	Female	Male
	(n=23)	(n=16)	(n=10)	(n=29)	(n=19)	(n=10)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Thought it was funny	30.4 (7)	25.0 (4)	10.0 (1)	37.9 (11)	36.8 (7)	40.0 (4)
Thought it was sexy or flirty	34.8 (8)	12.5 (2)	20.0 (2)	34.5 (10)	31.6 (6)	40.0 (4)
To get back at the person	13.0 (3)	12.5 (2)	60.0 (6)	27.6 (8)	31.6 (6) <sup>†</sup>	20.0 (2)
To impress friends	17.4 (4)	18.8 (3)	20.0 (2)	20.7 (6)	26.3 (5) <sup>†</sup>	10.0 (1)
To embarrass the person	4.3 (1)	12.5 (2)	20.0 (2)	17.2 (5)	15.8 (3)	20.0 (2)
To control the person	8.7 (2)	12.5 (2)	10.0 (1)	13.8 (4)	21.1 (4) <sup>†</sup>	0.0 (0)
To humiliate the person	13.0 (3)	6.3 (1)	20.0 (2)	13.8 (4)	5.3 (1) <sup>†</sup>	30.0 (3)
Trade images for other images	8.7 (2)	6.3 (1)	10.0 (1)	6.9 (2)	5.3 (1)	10.0 (1)
Trade images for money	4.3 (1)	6.3 (1)	0.0 (0)	3.4 (1)	5.3 (1)	0.0 (0)

*Note.* Respondents could select multiple motivations, and the different forms of IBSA are not mutually exclusive (i.e., the same respondents may have taken, shared, and/or threatened to share intimate images of another person. † Difference of 10.0% or more with a minimum of a small effect size (i.e., a noteworthy gender difference).

Table 5

*Reactions of bystanders across the different forms of intimate image sharing*

	Bystander group			Gender	
	Shown	Sent	Both forms	Female	Male
	(n=130) % (n)	(n=65) % (n)	(n=142) % (n)	(n=101) % (n)	(n=41) % (n)
Uncomfortable	40.0 (52)	44.6 (29)	43.7 (62)	45.5 (46)	39.0 (16)
Embarrassed	35.4 (46)	32.3 (21)	39.4 (56)	45.5 (46)*	24.4 (10)
Bothered but did not say something	25.4 (33)	30.8 (20)	31.0 (44)	30.7 (31)	31.7 (13)
Okay with it	24.6 (32)	27.7 (18)	31.0 (44)	29.7 (30)	34.1 (14)
Bothered and said something	20.8 (27)	29.2 (19)	25.4 (36)	25.7 (26)	24.4 (10)
Funny	9.2 (12)	13.8 (9)	14.8 (21)	9.9 (10)*	26.8 (11)

*Note.* Respondents could select multiple reactions, and the different forms of intimate image sharing are not mutually exclusive (i.e., the same respondents may have been shown and/or sent intimate images of another person. \*  $p < .05$  (i.e., a significant gender difference).