Behavioral Intentions of Bystanders to Image-Based Sexual Abuse: A Preliminary

Focus Group Study with a University Student Sample

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Abstract

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) represents a form of technology-facilitated sexual abuse that encompasses the taking, creating, and/or sharing (including threats to share) of nude or sexual images without consent. Unlike physical sexual violence contexts, little is known regarding if and how bystanders intervene in IBSA contexts. The current preliminary study aimed to address this gap in the literature. Specifically, seven focus groups with a sample of 35 university students (31 females, 4 males) were conducted to explore how they think they would behave (i.e., their behavioral intentions) if they were bystanders to three different IBSA scenarios: non-consensual taking, non-consensual sharing, and threatening to share nude or sexual images. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis and the following themes were identified: *perpetrator-centered action*, *victim-centered action*, *justice-centered action*, and *intervention as a well-informed and controlled process*. Participants discussed how they would intervene by approaching the perpetrator, either in a confrontational or non-confrontational way, or approach the victim to inform them of what was happening, provide advice, or to support them. They also discussed involving the police. However, some group members were against these forms of intervention, particularly approaching the perpetrator and involving the police. Finally, many participants indicated that their actions need to be well-informed. These findings highlight a wide range of bystander actions in IBSA contexts that have implications for the development of policies, educational materials, and measures of bystander intervention behavior in future research.

Keywords: Bystander intervention; social-justice ally; behavioral intentions; image-based sexual abuse; revenge pornography; non-consensual pornography; technology-facilitated sexual abuse

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Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) encompasses the taking, creating, and/or sharing (including threats to share) of nude or sexual images (i.e., photos or videos) of others without their consent (Henry et al., 2019; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). Interest in IBSA from the public, academics, government officials, and policy makers has increased in recent years (Powell et al., 2019), largely because of technological developments in smartphones and computers making it easier to capture and share images (Bates, 2017; Marcum et al., 2020). Furthermore, a recent report compared self-reported rates of IBSA victimization among two comparable samples of Australian adolescents and adults and found that experiences of at least one form of IBSA had increased from 23% in 2016 to 38% in 2019 (Powell et al., 2020).

Increases in the prevalence of IBSA naturally leads to concerns regarding the impacts of IBSA, which have been likened to the impacts of other sexual violence (SV)[1] (e.g., rape, sexual assault) (McGlynn et al., 2020). Research with adult victims of IBSA suggests nearly all experience some form of negative feeling as a result of their victimization (Henry et al., 2020; Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017), and research with adult and adolescent victims suggests many experience high levels of psychological distress, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (e.g., Bates, 2017; Henry et al., 2017). Adult and adolescent victims have also reported a range of social impacts (e.g., reputational and safety concerns, negative relational impacts; McGlynn et al., 2020; Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017), and impacts upon their mental health (e.g., self-harm, suicide attempts; McGlynn et al.,

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[1] Although IBSA has been conceptualized as being part of the continuum of SV (see McGlynn et al., 2017), in the current article, the use of the term 'SV' is used to refer exclusively to physical or contact SV for ease of differentiation and comparison between the two.

2019). Altogether, the evidence shows that IBSA is highly prevalent and can have devastating impacts on victims.

An avenue for prevention that has gained significant traction in the literature in recent years is bystander intervention. *Bystanders* are individuals who witness or are aware of criminal behaviors or social rule violations (Banyard et al., 2018; Burn, 2009), and the role and actions of bystanders in SV and dating violence (DV) contexts is well-established (see Burn, 2009; Powell, 2014). A recent study by Lee et al. (2021) asked high-school students to write a plan of action for a future encounter of SV or DV, and found that most reported confronting the perpetrator and telling them to stop. They also described how they would help the victim by checking in with them, offering emotional support, or by removing them from the situation; or how they would physically break up with situation, create a distraction, or engage the perpetrator in some kind of discussion (e.g., by asking why they are engaging in this behavior). Finally, many high-school students described how they would ask others to help intervene (e.g., school personnel, peers, or the police).

A recent systematic review by Debnam and Mauer (2021) summarized five trends in the literature that best represented the range of intervention behaviors adolescents reported they would use in DV contexts: (i) direct verbal confrontation where they verbally confront the perpetrator or offer the victim support or advice; (ii) direct physical confrontation where they would use physical aggression or a physical act to separate the perpetrator and the victim; (iii) distraction techniques where they would try to distract the perpetrator or remove the victim from the situation; (iv) indirect methods where they access outside support (e.g., from adults) or by helping a victim to access support services; and (v) passive or active acceptance where they do not do anything to support the victim or stop the abuse.

Despite a wealth of evidence looking at intended and actual bystander behavior in both SV and DV contexts, and the increased interest in IBSA, little research has considered

bystander intervention in this context. However, there is good reason to believe that bystanders could play an important role in the prevention and minimization of harms associated with this behavior if they provide appropriate support and intervention. For example, individuals may be approached by friends who have experienced or are experiencing IBSA and therefore act as a source of informal support. Victims of the non-consensual sharing of images have reported how support from friends and family helped them to feel safe in the aftermath of their victimization (Bates, 2017). Individuals may also witness IBSA directly via public displays of the non-consensual taking of nude or sexual images (e.g., upskirting), or receiving non-consensually shared images from other people. Data from the UK shows that most reported upskirting incidents occur in public places (Crown Prosecution Service, 2021). Finally, a recent Australian survey found that 64% of respondents had witnessed some form of IBSA (Flynn et al., in pressa), suggesting that many individuals will be bystanders to IBSA.

Although little research has examined bystander intervention in the context of IBSA, initial findings suggest comparable bystander actions to those in SV and DV contexts. A recent survey found that bystanders to real-life incidents of IBSA were most likely to confront the perpetrator (56%), tell a friend, family member, or colleague (50%), distance themselves from the perpetrator (47%), and support the victim (47%) (Flynn et al., in pressa). Comparatively fewer contacted the police or other official (15%), threatened the perpetrator or took physical action (13%), or reported the perpetrator to a provider or online platform (7%). For the non-consensual sharing of images, Harder (2020) reported that some bystanders to this behavior intervened by verbally confronting the person who was sharing these images. However, other bystanders reported more passive responses, such as simply acknowledging the behavior. Therefore, it is important to determine what alternative strategies are available for bystanders to prevent and minimize the harms associated with this

behavior. Overall, studies to date have either limited their focus upon particular forms of
IBSA (e.g., non-consensual sharing) or utilized data collection methods which restricted
respondents to particular types of behavior (e.g., use of closed-ended questions), thereby
limiting our understanding of the nuances of bystander behavior in the context of IBSA.

The Current Study

Bystanders can play an important role in the prevention and minimization of harms
for victims, but little research has examined bystander intervention in the context of IBSA in
comparison to SV and DV contexts. The current study aims to address this gap by gaining an
understanding of how individuals believe they would act if they were bystanders to three
different forms of IBSA. Using a qualitative focus group methodology, participants were
asked to imagine that they were a bystander and to describe how they would act in response
to incidents depicting the non-consensual taking, non-consensual sharing, and threatening to
share nude or sexual images. By understanding individuals' behavioral intentions in these
situations, the findings of the current study will help create a knowledge base that can be used
to inform the development of bystander intervention programs. We believe the study is
timely and important given that previous research has already demonstrated the importance
of guidance on appropriate support and intervention in IBSA contexts (Flynn et al., in
pressb), and the efficacy of bystander intervention programs in SV contexts (e.g., Mujal et
al., 2021).

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Method

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Participants

Thirty-five university students took part in one of seven focus groups, each
comprising between four and eight participants, with data collection ceasing once theoretical
saturation was reached (i.e., no new ideas were discussed; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Thirty-
one participants identified as female and four identified as male, resulting in four female-only

and three mixed-gender focus groups. The average age of participants was 23.00 years ($SD =$ 7.41, range of 18 to 53 years). Most participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 22$), followed by bisexual ($n = 11$), homosexual ($n = 1$), and asexual ($n = 1$). Most participants identified as White ($n = 20$), followed by Asian/Asian British ($n = 7$), Mixed/multiple ethnic groups ($n = 2$), and Other ($n = 6$). Nine participants had previously attended a bystander intervention educational program.

Materials

Participants were provided with a participant information sheet, a data privacy information sheet, an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a debrief sheet. During the focus group discussions, participants were also provided with three scenarios (via PowerPoint and print), with each scenario describing a different form of IBSA: (i) the *non-consensual taking* scenario described an incident where the bystander witnesses a person trying to take an intimate image of someone on a train; (ii) the *non-consensual sharing* scenario described an incident where the bystander receives a sexually explicit image of one of their friends from their friend's ex-partner, and (iii) the *threatening to share* scenario described an incident where the bystander is informed by a friend of theirs, that this friend's ex-partner is threatening to share sexually explicit images of them with their parents (see Appendix). The researcher followed a semi-structured schedule to facilitate the discussions. Within the schedule, participants were asked general questions about how they would react and why (e.g., 'How would you react in this situation?', 'Why would you react this way?'), as well as more specific questions (e.g., 'Can you think of any slight variations of the details in these scenarios which might change how would react, and why?').

Procedure

Participants were recruited via a research participation scheme, posters displayed on the university campus, and word-of-mouth. Participants received course credits or a monetary

reward of £10 for their participation. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Goldsmiths, University of London and was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework prior to data collection.

Before the focus groups, participants were asked to read the participant and data privacy information sheets, and to provide their informed consent. The focus group discussions started with an ice-breaker task, followed by an outline of the aim of the focus group and the ground rules for the discussions. These discussions were then split into three parts. Part one involved participants viewing each scenario and considering how they would react to each scenario and why (the scenarios were presented sequentially, with the order counterbalanced across the seven focus groups). Parts two and three involved participants discussing the facilitators and barriers to bystander intervention and are not directly relevant to the current article and therefore not reported here. At the end of the focus groups, participants were thanked, debriefed, completed the demographic questionnaire, and given a copy of the debrief sheet.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes present within the focus group discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Specifically, the stages outlined in Braun and Clarke were followed: (i) the audio recordings were transcribed and checked, and the transcripts were read multiple times while noting the topics of discussion; (ii) the initial codes were generated using MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2020); (iii) these codes were collated into initial themes and refined to ensure they addressed the research questions and did not overlap too much; (iv) these initial themes were then reviewed to ensure they worked across all the data, and in relation to the coded extracts; and (v) themes were defined and named in regard to how they related to the research questions. Overall, a primarily inductive

approach was taken given the exploratory nature of the research, whereby the codes and themes were derived from the content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The results provide a summary of the main themes and associated subthemes (where applicable), with direct quotes used to illustrate relevant and important points. For each quote, participant gender, focus group number, and scenario being discussed (i.e., taking, sharing, threatening) is specified. Themes and subthemes that are only applicable to certain scenarios are identified in the text, and pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity of the participants. For this study, the term 'victim' refers to individuals who have had a nude or sexually explicit image taken, shared, or threatened to be shared, without their consent. The term 'perpetrator' refers to individuals who have taken, shared, or threatened to share a nude or sexually explicit image of another without that person's consent. Finally, the term 'bystander' refers to individuals who witness or become aware of the non-consensual taking, sharing, or threatening to share a nude or sexual image of another person.

Results

In addressing the aim to understand how individuals believe they would act if they were bystanders to three different forms of IBSA, the following four themes were identified: *perpetrator-centered action*, *victim-centered action, justice-centered action*, and *intervention as a well-informed and controlled process*. Although presented separately here, these themes were not mutually exclusive (e.g., participants' actions fell under multiple themes). Each of these themes and associated subthemes are addressed in turn.

Perpetrator-Centered Action

This theme considers the variety of perpetrator-centered actions that participants discussed as ways to intervene. There are two subthemes that further distinguish the types of perpetrator-centered action that a bystander could take: *confronting the perpetrator* and *subtle/non-confrontational intervention.*

Confronting the Perpetrator

Across all focus groups and all three scenarios, participants discussed confronting the perpetrator as a way to intervene. Confronting the perpetrator appeared to manifest in a variety of ways depending on which scenario was being considered. As bystanders to the taking scenario, participants outlined how they would verbally confront the perpetrator about their behavior, "If the person sitting next to me is the person taking the picture, I'd definitely be like 'what are you doing? Like I can obviously see what you're doing.'" (Lexi, f, FG2, taking). Some participants even suggested that they would knock the phone out of the perpetrator's hand to stop them from taking the photos. As Imogen described, "I think I'd have probably hit the phone out of the guy's hand before I've even thought about what's even happening." (f, FG1, taking).

For the sharing and threatening scenarios, participants described how they would confront or talk to the perpetrator, but in many instances, this was to try and gain some understanding of why they had sent or threatened to send these images:

> George: My initial response would be to talk to this ex-partner … there must be some reason why this ex-partner has, feels the need for actually sharing it so, perhaps talking to this ex-partner and umm and trying to understand why. (m, FG4, threatening)

> Anabelle: I would confront the person and ask them first of all, if you split up why are you still in possession of those images and why do you think you have the right to send them round and share them to people … I'd definitely try and have a conversation with them and see why it is they're doing those things … (f, FG7, sharing)

Despite many participants describing actions they would take to confront the perpetrator, across all three scenarios, some were adamant that they would not confront the

perpetrator, as Amy described, "I wouldn't interact with them [the perpetrator]; I'd just leave

that …" (f, FG2, sharing). Stacey also described how she would not confront the perpetrator

in the taking scenario, "I wouldn't go straight to the guy … I don't feel capable of saying like

'excuse me', especially 'cause I don't know how they're going to react in case they hit me or

something …" (f, FG3, taking).

Other participants spoke of being hesitant to respond by confronting the perpetrator,

seemingly considering the potential negative outcomes or consequences of this. For the

taking scenario, these concerns focused more upon the potential for physical or violent

retaliation from the perpetrator. As Anabelle described, "…if I have the inner power like I

would confront the person, but you never know how they're going to react …" (f, FG7,

taking). Whereas, for the sharing and threatening scenarios, hesitations were focused more

upon the unlikely benefits, or possible consequences for the victim, of doing so:

> Bella: … if he's threatening the friend then he's not going to be nice about it at all, in
>
> any way, so maybe it would [do] more harm than good … I think the second you send
>
> anything to the ex; he's just going to send the pictures … (f, FG1, threatening)
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> Logan: … I know for a fact that my getting involved is just another person shouting,
>
> and it kind of … removes the purpose of the, the constructive argument … it just
>
> [be]comes more of a, social, social justice warriors like attacking one person, and it's
>
> like, it's not fixing the problem. (m, FG6, threatening)

Finally, for the taking scenario in particular, participants described how confronting

the perpetrator would not be an option in cases where the perpetrator is intoxicated, as Stacey

described, "If he's [the perpetrator] drunk … I wouldn't try to even say anything to him …

'cause there's just no point in reasoning with someone who's drunk." (f, FG3, taking).

Participants emphasized the importance of approaching the victim in these particular cases

rather than confronting the perpetrator, "I think if the perpetrator was intoxicated, I'd be more

likely to go and support whoever it was [the victim] … I wouldn't confront them." (Georgina, f, FG1, taking).

Subtle/Non-Confrontational Intervention

In contrast to confrontational actions towards the perpetrator, across the majority of focus groups, there was also discussion surrounding the type of intervention directed at the perpetrator being more subtle or non-confrontational. This subtheme appeared to be most relevant to the taking scenario. In contrast to directly confronting the perpetrator, as outlined previously, some participants described how they might take a kind of middle ground, where they would speak to or signal to the perpetrator that they were aware of their behavior, but in a non-confrontational manner. As Lily described, "I wouldn't particularly shout, but I would kind of make them aware that I saw type of thing." (f, FG4, taking). In most cases this option was put forward as a way to minimize the potential negative repercussions of talking to the perpetrator:

> Imogen: If you just … make the person aware, that you know what they are doing, by like, coughing or like moving your coat over … do it subtly … somehow make aware that … like you know what they are doing then they will probably stop doing it. (f, FG1, taking)

> Eloise: If you are not 100% sure, you could say 'I saw you taking … an intimate photo of somebody, would you mind showing me your camera roll, I could be wrong?', you don't have to say you know 'you were taking a photo', so you don't have to kind of outright accuse him, you can allow for the possibility that you were wrong. (f, FG4, taking)

Also specific to the taking scenario, participants described how they would try to block the view of the camera as a less-confrontational way to deal with the situation. Molly described how she would use this technique, "I feel like what I would probably do is talk to

the person who was standing and like maybe stand up and try and like get in the way." (f, FG3, taking).

Across the majority of focus groups, members described how they wanted to avoid making a scene on the train or avoid making a situation worse by having more people involved. As Sasha described, "getting more people involved might complicate it more than it already is …" (f, FG2, taking). This latter concern was also raised in relation to the threatening scenario:

> Amy: I would try and keep as few people involved as possible, so keeping parents out of it, keeping police out of it, and then trying to aid your friend in working it out with the person they were with, umm, I just think that might just be like the safest option. (f, FG2, threatening)

Victim-Centered Action

In addition to perpetrator-centered action, this theme considers the variety of victim-centered actions that participants discussed as ways to intervene. There are four subthemes which further distinguish the types of victim-centered action: *informing the victim*, *supporting the victim*, *providing advice to the victim*, and *indirect intervention*.

Informing the Victim

Across all focus groups, participants discussed how they would inform the victim of their victimization. This subtheme was present for both the taking and sharing scenarios[2]. Specifically, in the taking scenario, participants described how they would approach the victim to let them know that someone was trying to take an intimate image of them, "I think I'd try and capture the attention of the person who was being photographed … and then I'd tell them what happened." (Georgina, f, FG1, taking). In the sharing scenario, the participants

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[2] This would not be applicable to the threatening scenario because the victim has approached the bystander in this case and is therefore already aware of their victimization.

described how they would inform the victim that they had received an intimate image of them. Some participants expressed how they thought that this was the most important action that a bystander could take and needed to be done before anything else, "For me at least, the right thing to do would be to tell my friend, like the initial response would be to tell my friend." (Lily, f, FG4, sharing). One focus group member described how he had been in a similar situation before, and described how he informed the victim what was happening in this case:

> George: Yeah, I remember when I was 13 … one of my friends, umm, kind of showed me a picture of a girl in our class … what I ended up with doing was to send her a message and tell her that I knew someone had been kind of sharing pictures of her. (m, FG4, sharing)

Supporting the Victim

In addition to informing the victim of their victimization, across all focus groups and all scenarios, participants discussed some element of supporting the victim in the situation. However, showing concern and support for the victim was most commonly reported for both the sharing and threatening scenarios. Specifically, participants described how they would be supportive of the victim, using reassurance and validation of how the victim feels:

> Amy: I think maybe one of the most important things to do would be giving like moral support … so saying like, even if, worst case scenario, the pictures do get sent, you're always going to be there, so that they have kind of like a safety net. (f, FG2, threatening)

> Hope: I would want to be there for them and be like "are you ok?" and like "how are we going to go about it, because obviously this person is like disrespecting you …" (f, FG7, sharing)

Although this sentiment was most often discussed in regard to the sharing and threatening scenarios, it was still present when discussing the taking scenario. As Anabelle described, "… you just need to be able to support the person who that's happening to … there needs to be this whole like societal supporting of things." (f, FG7, taking). Furthermore, supporting the victim was key if the victim was intoxicated in the taking scenario. As Imogen described, "I think I'd focus more on the victim like and stay with them if they were drunker …" (f, FG1, taking). Stacey also described how she would feel protective of a victim who was intoxicated, "… if the woman was intoxicated, I would go full mumma bear on her … I'd protect her … I feel like I would want even more to protect her … than if she wasn't." (f, FG3, taking).

Additionally, many participants described how they would be concerned about the victim's mental health as a result of being victimized in this way, and some described personal experiences where victims of IBSA have been suicidal, and how this concern would ensure that they are emotionally supportive of the victim:

> Hope: … the most important thing is seeing how my friend is feeling … how they're coping with it … just supporting them as much as I can … I would, yeah, really want to make sure that mentally that they're OK. (f, FG7, threatening)

Relatedly, participants described how they would try to maintain composure and look beyond their own emotions and anger to help support the victim in the sharing and threatening scenarios, almost by trying to be the voice of reason. As Georgina described, "I'd be furious … but I'd try and maintain a level of composure so that I could support the friend." (f, FG1, sharing).

In terms of practical support, some participants described how they would go with the victim to the police if they wanted to report the incident, although again, this was only discussed in regard to the sharing and threatening scenarios. As Ola described, "I would also

probably tell her to go to the police, and I'd be like 'I'll go with you.'" (f, FG3, sharing). This also shows evidence of providing advice to the victim, in the form of advising the victim to contact the police, which is linked to the theme below. Nina also described having been in a similar position with a friend, "I did have a friend that was in this situation actually … and I went with her to the police." (f, FG7, threatening).

Providing Advice to the Victim

Alongside actions of emotional support for the victim, participants considered more practical support for the victim. Specifically, across the majority of focus groups, participants discussed how they would provide advice to the victim. This subtheme was present only in regard to the threatening scenario where participants said they would recommend that the victim talks to their parents about the threats as a way to minimize the potential damage. As Ola described, "I would like, actually probably tell my friend to tell her parents it's happening …" (f, FG3, threatening). Although, a few participants felt that this would have to be handled sensitively and may only be advisable in contexts where the relationship between the victim and the parents was appropriate:

> Anabelle: … I think it really depends on their standing with their parents …
>
> depending in their relationship with their parents and the things that they talk about, if
>
> they had a relationship that allowed them to discuss this with them that would really
>
> help them, and it would alleviate a lot of the stress and pressure that this is causing ...
>
> (f, FG7, threatening)

Finally, some participants discussed how the victim could deny that it is themselves in the images, particularly if the image did not display the victim's face. Imogen described how she would suggest this course of action, "I think if their face isn't in it, I'd advise them … to just deny it's them." (f, FG1, threatening).

Indirect Intervention

Lastly, some participants described actions that were more indirect or subtle but still focused upon the victim. This was particularly in regard to the taking scenario. Specifically, participants described how they would offer the victim their seat as a way to avoid confronting the situation directly. As Logan described, "I'd probably just swap seats with them, I'd stand and let them sit down, 'cause you don't have to bring any attention to it." (m, FG7, taking). Georgina described a similar course of action, "I think I'd try and capture the attention of the person who was being photographed and say, 'do you want to come and sit with me or do you want to swap seats' …" (f, FG1, taking).

Justice-Centered Action

In addition to perpetrator- and victim-centered actions, this theme considers the variety of justice-centered actions that participants discussed. Across all focus groups and all three scenarios, there was discussion surrounding the involvement of the police as a way to intervene. Most participants recognized that the behaviors described in the scenarios were illegal and therefore felt that one of the ways in which they would intervene would be by contacting the police or suggesting that the victim contact the police. For example, Lily described how the behavior described in the threatening scenario is illegal and would encourage them to tell the victim to go to the police, "I would tell the person to go to the police. 'Cause it's actually illegal and can be put down as harassment ..." (f, FG4, threatening). Molly also described how informing the police in the sharing scenario would mean it would be "on the record" and that if the images spread further, it would show that "he's the only person that did that" (f, FG3, sharing). Furthermore, Nina described how in the sharing scenario, there would be evidence of this behavior in having received the image, and therefore, "I really would encourage contacting the police because you do have the evidence,

right, if it was texted … you might have some evidence and you could bring forward to the police." (f, FG7, sharing).

Relatedly, and as can be seen from the previous quote, many participants discussed the importance of obtaining evidence of the behavior to ensure that the police can help. Specifically, for the taking scenario, participants discussed recording the incident or the use of security cameras to obtain evidence. One focus group member drew upon a real-life example where the recording of an upskirting incident had a positive outcome:

> Amy: I would probably record it … 'cause that happened recently on a train and the guy got recorded and his family ended up finding out, only simply 'cause they had evidence … if the person being recorded wanted to take things further and have some kind of legal action then there's actually evidence that it went down. (f, FG2, taking)

For the sharing and threatening scenarios, participants felt that they should keep hold of the image sent to them or encourage their friend to retain evidence of the perpetrator's threats, as such actions would be helpful in the pursuit of justice:

> Georgina: I'd tell the friend to collect evidence of them doing this, of them threatening them … by recording this, these threats, you can make a case and you can say 'look this is not OK, I can take you to court' … (f, FG1, threatening)

Conversely, a large minority of participants actively discussed not involving the police or that involving the police would not be their first course of action:

> Lucy: So, I'd deal with it first, like I'd go find him, do what I can, and then we can take it to the police, like, but the initial thing needs to be stopped first, like the police aren't going to be that fast … (f, FG2, threatening)

George described a similar reluctance to inform the police in the taking scenario, "… I feel like calling the police it wouldn't, wouldn't necessarily help in this situation 'cause it's not like, uhh, something that has been done already." (m, FG4, taking).

Intervention as a Well-Informed and Controlled Process

Alongside themes that focused upon particular actions in response to three different IBSA scenarios, were considerations of bystander intervention behavior more generally. Specifically, across all focus groups and all scenarios, there were discussions which suggested that as bystanders, their type of intervention needed to be well-thought-out, informed, and controlled. Firstly, participants described how they would want to get more information about the situation before deciding how to proceed. As Ola described, "… I'd be like, what … when, what, where, how, what, you know, give me all the details." (f, FG3, threatening). Troy proposed a similar course of action for the taking scenario, "Well I think I would try and contact either of the people to see what the situation actually is because this could be like either blown out of proportion or go out of control." (m, FG7, taking). This theme is linked to the 'confront the perpetrator' subtheme outlined previously, whereby bystanders would seek to question the perpetrator's motives as this may provide additional insight and understanding of how best to approach the situation.

Participants discussed their fears surrounding the uncertainty of what they had seen or heard if they were to find themselves in any of these situations, and the desire to be well-informed often resulted in hesitation amongst the participants. As Nicola described, "I'd be scared that I might get it wrong, and that the repercussions of that … I'd be second guessing myself." (f, FG1, taking). Furthermore, this desire to be well-informed appeared to have an impact on the actions that they would take:

> Troy: Cos you don't know like … what's really happening, whether this situation is what you think it is … so it's a good thing to check with one of them, preferably the person on the aisle, as to what we think is happening is actually happening, or if it's something else. (m, FG7, taking)

In addition to feeling hesitant in their actions due to second-guessing what was happening, some participants described initial concerns in regard to how they should intervene with some suggesting that they would be unlikely to do anything. As Ola described, "I think I would freeze up; I would not know what to do." (f, FG3, taking). Troy described similar concerns, "… it would be a mixture of panic and worry in the sense that panic … in terms of how am I supposed to react now, what am I supposed to do? …" (m, FG7, taking). Lola even felt that she would likely ignore what was happening, "…realistically I wouldn't, I'd just like … yeah probably block it out …" (f, FG6, taking).

Across both the taking and threatening scenarios participants showed evidence of a conflict between the 'correct' actions and those that they would want to perform. For the taking scenario, the 'correct' action appeared to be to say something or bring attention to the situation, but many participants felt that this may not be what they actually would do (i.e., they might do nothing). As Frankie explained, "There's what I want to do because I want to do the morally right thing, which is make a big fuss, and then there is what I'd really do, would I really make a fuss, I don't know" (f, FG4, taking). Another focus group member also highlighted the conflict between what they would like to do and what they would be likely to do in the moment:

> Sophia: I think that instinctually I would want to react in the ways that you've [another participant] mentioned, like I would want to hit them, I'd like, whack their phone out of their hands and have a go but I don't know if in the moment I would end up doing that. (f, FG5, taking)

For the threatening scenario, the 'correct' action appeared to be maintaining composure and trying to be logical in their approach to dealing with the situation, but some felt that they might not be able to do this because they would be angry and would want to confront the perpetrator. Esme described this conflict, "I just like, all the answers, like that

I'm giving are what I'd logically do but I know in this actual situation I would just be trying to tear down this ex-partner's door." (f, FG6, threatening).

Relatedly, participants spoke of wanting their response to be rational and diplomatic rather than emotionally charged. Hope described wanting to "… look at all the things logically." (f, FG7, threatening). However, some participants were less concerned about this, and felt that their reactions would be emotionally motivated and therefore that they would react first and think about the consequences later. As Lily described, "Where there are friends involved, I can get quite angry and not very calculated in my actions … it's stuff like that I usually react first, think later." (f, FG4, sharing). Some also felt that their decisions to intervene were time-sensitive which may explain the need for a quick, less well-thought-out response:

> Mia: I think like with scenario 1 [threatening scenario] you've got that opportunity to kind of see what the footings like in that situation, to discuss … how would that friend want you to react and how, and what would be appropriate … but in scenario 3 [taking scenario], you kind of have to make that split decision in a second … I might have to act on this person's behalf, the victim's behalf, because they might not know it's happening ... (f, FG5, taking/threatening)

Discussion

This study was the first to consider how individuals believe they would act if they were bystanders to three different forms of IBSA, and the thematic analysis revealed three main themes relating to the behavioral intentions of bystanders to IBSA: perpetrator-centered action, victim-centered action, and justice-centered action. In addition, a fourth theme reflected the importance of any intervention being well-informed and controlled.

Regarding perpetrator-centered action, participants discussed how they would confront the perpetrator if they were a bystander to IBSA. For the taking scenario,

participants described how they would verbally confront the perpetrator to stop them from

taking the photo or may physically confront the perpetrator by knocking their phone from

their hand. These findings mirror those found in the SV and DV literature whereby

bystanders reported using direct verbal confrontation techniques in these instances (Debnam

& Mauer, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Similarly, for the sharing and threatening scenarios,

participants described confronting the perpetrator via text, but often this form of

confrontation was a way for the bystander to obtain an understanding of why the perpetrator

had sent or threatened to send, this image. Again, this aligns with the findings of Lee et al.

(2021) who reported that bystanders would engage in a discussion with the perpetrator to

understand why they did what they did. However, not all participants in the current study felt

that they would confront or approach the perpetrator. Often this was due to fear of how the

perpetrator would respond to such confrontation. The current findings align, but also extend

those of Harder (2020) and Flynn et al. (in pressa), by highlighting that these responses occur

in all three types of IBSA contexts, as well as the nuances of these behaviors in each of these

contexts (i.e., differences in how perpetrators are confronted). Relatedly, more subtle and

non-confrontational intervention towards the perpetrator was described, whereby participants

would try to indicate that they were aware of the behavior. The more subtle forms of

intervention have also not been highlighted in previous literature. This finding in particular

may reflect the nuances associated with IBSA behaviors in comparison to SV and DV more

generally, whereby bystanders may consider more subtle forms of intervention to be suitable

and proportionate to the threat being presented.

Regarding victim-centered action, participants discussed how they would inform the

victim of what was happening if the victim appeared to be unaware of the situation. Again,

this is a unique form of intervention in IBSA contexts because victims of SV and DV are

generally aware of their victimization. Participants also described how they would want to

support the victim in these situations. The potential need to inform the victim is a unique

finding that has not been considered previously, whereas the intent to support the victim

aligns with the findings of previous literature in SV, DV, and IBSA contexts (Debnam &

Mauer, 2021; Flynn et al., in pressa; Lee et al., 2021). It is particularly encouraging that

bystanders to IBSA are willing to provide this support given that past research has

demonstrated that support for victims of SV is vital for their mental health (Ahrens, 2006).

Similar to providing support, participants described how they would offer the victim advice

on how best to deal with the situation and how they may engage in more indirect forms of

intervention with the victim. For example, participants suggested that they may offer the

victim their seat in the taking scenario as this would avoid any conflict or confrontation with

the perpetrator. Indirect forms of intervention are similar to the distraction techniques used in

DV contexts, as described in the review by Debnam and Mauer (2021), and again

demonstrate consistency in the behavior of bystanders in other abusive contexts.

Regarding justice-centered action, many participants acknowledged the illegality of

the behaviors described in the scenarios and outlined how they would inform the police or

advise the victim to inform the police of the situation. They also discussed the importance of

gathering evidence of the behaviors before informing the police. Although the engagement of

resources and people outside of the immediate situation aligns with past research (Flynn et

al., in pressa; Lee et al., 2021), the importance of gathering evidence has not been considered

previously. This finding is particularly important given the evidentiary challenges associated

with the prosecution of IBSA cases (Henry et al., 2018; Marcum et al., 2020). It is

encouraging that participants were thinking ahead in terms of the difficulties the victim may

face if they decide to pursue a conviction and how this can be minimized. However,

consistent with previous research (Flynn et al., in pressa), some participants discussed how

they would not involve the police. Therefore, future research should consider why some

bystanders are reluctant to inform the police if we are to remove barriers in the future and encourage a cultural shift towards the prosecution of IBSA cases.

Finally, participants discussed the importance of any intervention being well-informed and controlled. They described how they would want to have as much information about the situation as possible and how any fears or uncertainty regarding what they had seen or heard may cause them to hesitate before acting. Importantly, these types of considerations have not been examined previously in IBSA contexts. Therefore, future research should consider if and how bystander confidence influences the likelihood of intervention in IBSA contexts, as well as how bystander confidence can be increased to encourage intervention.

Implications

The findings of the current study have important implications for policy, practice, and future research. First, there are important implications for the development of bystander intervention programs. A recent report found that campaigns which provided clear guidance on actions bystanders could take in cases of IBSA were received more positively, and that future campaigns should provide clear advice about the actions which could be taken in these contexts (Flynn et al., in pressb). Equally, additional evidence has highlighted the difficulties that bystanders can face in speaking up against the behavior, despite their desire to do so (Harder, 2020). Harder (2020) also recommended that future intervention programs focus on the complexities of bystander behavior and encourage actions beyond that of vocal condemnation of the behavior. Therefore, the current findings can help with this endeavor by informing the development of educational materials or programs to reflect the behaviors that bystanders are likely to, or consider, engaging in. Programs would benefit from being structured around the types of intervention that might be taken and provide education about each of these types. For example, as bystanders are likely to support the victim, it would be

worthwhile to provide education about how they can best provide this support (i.e., what they can say, what organizations they can refer them to).

Relatedly, some forms of intervention have important safety implications that need to be reflected in these programs. For example, the current study and past research (e.g., Flynn et al., in press) have found that individuals often discuss how they would verbally confront the perpetrator. However, confronting a perpetrator in this manner may cause them to retaliate, which puts the bystander at risk of harm. Past research has shown that direct forms of intervention in violent incidents can leave bystanders experiencing traumatic stress symptoms (Witte et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important that educational programs provide suitable safeguards and alternatives for intervention in these contexts.

Finally, as highlighted in the current study, not all bystanders want to involve the police in the context of IBSA because of concerns regarding the ability of the justice system to handle the situation appropriately or sensitively. These concerns have implications for the police, and the justice system more broadly, and the way they engage with the public. It is important to acknowledge that many individuals are reluctant to involve the police, and that efforts must be made to engage with the public to increase their sense of trust in the handling of IBSA cases. It is also crucial for future research to better understand why some bystanders are not comfortable approaching the police so that specific barriers to justice-centered action can be identified and addressed.

Limitations and Future Research

It is necessary to acknowledge that the current study was limited in its use of hypothetical scenarios with a relatively small, predominantly female, university student sample. Although created to reflect real-life situations, the hypothetical scenarios used in this study described incidents at the more serious end of the continuum (e.g., for the sharing scenario, the victim was a friend, and it was implied that the photo was being shared with the

bystander with malicious intent). Therefore, future research needs to use hypothetical scenarios that describe incidents at the other end of the continuum so that the impact of normalization and minimization upon bystander intervention can be explored. Normalization and minimization are particularly important because they may impact bystander intervention by blurring the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, thereby making it more difficult to determine if, and if so when, to intervene.

Regarding the use of a relatively small university student sample, it is important to acknowledge that the findings cannot be generalized to the general population due to important contextual considerations, such as the high prevalence of SV reported among university students (e.g., Fedina et al., 2018). To address this limitation, quantitative research with larger general population samples is needed to examine bystander intervention in IBSA contexts. Although there are no established questionnaires which measure behavioral intentions to intervene in IBSA contexts, the themes identified in the current study and past research can be used to inform the development of such measures. Future quantitative research would also benefit from measuring and controlling for potential confounds such as previous IBSA victimization and engagement in bystander intervention education programs to examine whether they influence behavioral intentions.

Finally, regarding the use of a predominantly female sample, it is important to acknowledge the small number of male participants in the current study, as well as the absence of any male-only focus groups. Although there were no discernible differences in intended bystander actions across female-only and mixed-gender focus groups, the small number of male participants suggest the findings of the current study are more applicable to female bystanders. A distinction that is important given some evidence to suggest that females are more likely to intervene in SV contexts than males (see Mainwaring et al., 2022). Therefore, future research using a similar focus group methodology with a more gender-

balanced sample is needed to confirm whether there are any important differences between males and females in intended bystander actions in IBSA contexts.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand how individuals believe they would act if they were bystanders to three different forms of IBSA. Participants described their likely engagement in direct intervention (e.g., confronting the perpetrator) as well as more subtle, non-confrontational, and indirect forms of intervention (e.g., supporting the victim, blocking the view of the camera). Specifically, their actions fell under four main themes: perpetrator-centered action, victim-centered action, justice-centered action, and intervention as a well-informed and controlled process. Many forms of intervention mirrored those found in previous research relating to bystander intervention in SV and DV contexts. However, new and nuanced forms of intervention were also identified in the context of IBSA. From a practice perspective, the findings of this study can be used to inform the development of policies and educational materials or programs so that they relate to the behaviors bystanders are likely to engage in. From a research perspective, the findings can be used to inform the development of measures of behavioral intentions that will help further our understanding of bystander intervention in IBSA contexts.

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Appendix

Focus Group Scenarios

Non-consensual taking scenario:

Imagine that you are on a train home after having been at university. A person is standing in the aisle of the carriage and a person is sitting next to you. The person sitting next to you appears to be on their phone. You notice that they have opened the camera app on their phone and appear to be trying to take an intimate image of the person who is standing in the aisle of the carriage.

Non-consensual sharing scenario:

Imagine that one of your friends has just split up with their partner. One evening, you receive sexually explicit images of your friend from their ex-partner.

Threatening to share scenario:

Imagine that you are having a discussion with one of your friends and they disclose that their ex-partner is threatening to send sexually explicit images of your friend to your friends' parents.