

**Facilitators and Barriers of Bystander Intervention Intent in Image-Based Sexual Abuse
Contexts: A Focus Group Study with a University Sample**

Chelsea Mainwaring^a, Adrian J Scott^b, and Fiona Gabbert^b

^aSchool of Social Sciences and Professions, London Metropolitan University, N7 8DB,
United Kingdom

^bDepartment of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London, SE14 6NW, United Kingdom

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Chelsea Mainwaring

Email: c.mainwaring@londonmet.ac.uk

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Abstract

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) encompasses the taking, sharing, and/or threatening to share nude or sexual images of others without their consent. The prevalence of IBSA is growing rapidly due to technological advancements, such as access to smartphones, that have made engagement in such activities easier. Bystanders offer an important means of intervention, but little is known about what facilitates or inhibits bystander action in these contexts. To address this gap in the literature, seven focus groups ($n = 35$) were conducted to explore the factors that facilitate and inhibit bystander action in the context of three different IBSA scenarios (taking, sharing, and making threats to share nude or sexual images without consent). Using thematic analysis, eight themes were identified, suggesting that the perceived likelihood of intervention increased with greater feelings of responsibility, empathy with the victim, reduced feelings of audience inhibition, greater feelings of safety, greater anger towards the IBSA behaviour, closer relationships with the victim and perpetrator, the incident involving a female victim and male perpetrator, and perception of greater benefits of police involvement. These findings are considered alongside the physical sexual violence literature in highlighting the similarities and nuances across the different contexts. Implications for the development of policies and educational materials are discussed in relation to encouraging greater bystander intervention in IBSA contexts.

Keywords: bystander intervention; social-justice ally; image-based sexual abuse; revenge pornography; technology-facilitated sexual abuse

Facilitators and Barriers of Bystander Intervention Intent in Image-Based Sexual Abuse Contexts: A Focus Group Study with a University Sample

Image-based sexual abuse (ISBA) describes the taking, sharing, and/or threatening to share nude or sexual images (i.e., photos or videos) of others without their consent (Henry et al., 2019; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). The prevalence of IBSA is growing rapidly due to technological advancements and access to smartphones, cameras, and computers which have made the engagement in such activities easier, and the removal of such images extremely difficult (Branch et al., 2017; Marcum et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to explore ways in which this behaviour can be prevented, and the harm to victims minimised. One approach to this endeavour is through the encouragement of bystander intervention. The current study explores factors that facilitate and inhibit bystander intervention intent in the context of IBSA, through the use of focus groups, to provide insights into why an individual may or may not intervene.

Recent data suggests that 1 in 3 adults have had nude or sexual images taken or created without their consent (e.g., Henry et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2019), 1 in 5 have had images shared without consent (more widely known as ‘revenge pornography’) (e.g., Branch et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2020), and 1 in 7 have experienced threats to share nude or sexual images (e.g., Henry et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2019). Victims of IBSA often experience a range of negative impacts as a result of their victimisation (e.g., Henry et al., 2020); impacts that have been likened to those of victims of physical sexual violence (SV; McGlynn et al., 2020). For example, victims describe experiencing a loss of self-esteem, self-worth, concerns for their reputation, and negative impacts upon their personal relationships, while displaying symptoms of high psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD (e.g., Bates, 2017; McGlynn et al., 2020).

Given the prevalence of IBSA and impacts on victims, it is important to develop

measures to prevent and minimise the harm of this behaviour. One approach is to encourage bystander intervention. In the context of the current study, *bystanders* are defined as individuals who witness or are aware of criminal behaviours or social rule violations (Banyard et al., 2018; Burn, 2009). In the context of IBSA, examples include a bystander witnessing an incident of upskirting on a train, being forwarded or shown a nude or sexual image of an individual who did not consent for them to see that image, or being told by a friend that their ex-partner is threatening to share their nude images. Bystander intervention could take the form of a variety of different actions, including those focused on the victim (e.g., providing emotional support), focused on the perpetrator (e.g., condemning the behaviour), or engaging with the police (see Mainwaring et al., 2023 for a more in depth discussion).

The role of bystanders in the context of physical SV is well-established in the literature, and much time has been dedicated to understanding what factors facilitate and inhibit bystander intervention (see Mainwaring et al., 2022 for a review). However, little attention has been given to the role of bystanders in IBSA contexts, despite many individuals being bystanders to IBSA, and less than half of these bystanders intervening (Flynn et al., 2022b). Exploring what facilitates and inhibits bystander action in IBSA contexts can help us better understand this behaviour and inform practical applications that encourage intervention.

Given the limited evidence regarding bystander intervention in IBSA contexts, the consideration of theoretical models and empirical evidence from physical SV contexts can inform this research. One of the most influential models in the literature is the Bystander Intervention Model which was introduced by Latané and Darley (1970). The development of this model arose from the work by Darley and Latané (1968) in trying to understand the impact of the presence of other bystanders on helping behaviour in emergency situations. This model suggests that bystanders go through a five-stage process before taking action, that

involves: (1) noticing the event, (2) identifying the event as one which is problematic or presenting a risk, (3) taking responsibility for intervention, (4) deciding whether one has the skills and competency to intervene, and (5) engaging in intervention. Further, there are barriers to intervention when in the presence of other bystanders, including a diffusion of responsibility, pluralistic ignorance, and audience inhibition (Burn, 2009; Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968, 1970).

Another more recent model which has been used to explain bystander behaviour in SV contexts is the Bystander Action Coils Model (Banyard, 2015; Banyard et al., 2021). This model takes a more holistic approach to explaining bystander behaviour, specifying the importance of characteristics of the event itself, contextual factors, and a feedback loop whereby past bystander intervention experience and outcomes impacts future intentions to intervene, alongside internal decision-making processes which are the main focus of the aforementioned model (Banyard, 2015). Application of both the Bystander Intervention Model and associated barriers (e.g., Burn, 2009; Katz et al., 2017), and elements of the Bystander Action Coils Model (Banyard et al., 2021) have been supported in physical SV contexts. However, little research has considered the application of these models and associated barriers in IBSA contexts.

In addition to theoretical models, empirical evidence looking at bystander intervention in the physical SV literature has provided valuable insight. Specifically, research has shown that when the victim is female compared to male (e.g., Katz, 2015; Savage et al., 2017), and when bystanders have greater empathy for the victims (e.g., Kaya et al., 2019; Yule et al., 2020), they are more likely to intervene. Furthermore, recent systematic reviews have found that the following factors increase the likelihood of intervention in physical SV contexts: being friends with the victim and reduced fear of violence or retaliation in response to intervention (Labhardt et al., 2017; Mainwaring et al., 2022).

In IBSA contexts, limited research has examined potential facilitators and barriers to bystander intervention. Using a survey method with an Australian sample, Flynn et al. (2022a) found that the main reasons for bystander intervention in real-life IBSA contexts were that the behaviour was deemed wrong and/or illegal and that intervention was considered the right thing to do. Conversely, one of the main reasons for a lack of intervention was feeling no personal responsibility. Using a focus group method and the same Australian sample, Flynn and colleagues conducted focus groups whereby they discussed hypothetical scenarios of IBSA, where the gender identity of the victim and perpetrator was manipulated, and details of non-group majority and marginalised groups were added to encourage discussion of these factors. Additional facilitators identified during these discussions included having a personal relationship with the victim or perpetrator and empathising with the victim. They found that bystanders were less likely to intervene if they believed there was a personal risk to themselves. Gender identity was also important, with some male bystanders being less likely to intervene when the perpetrator was female due to increased ambiguity of the situation (Flynn et al., 2022b).

The Current Study

The current study uses focus groups to explore factors that facilitate and inhibit bystander action in the context of three different IBSA scenarios. This method was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study, its successful implementation and use in related research (e.g., Flynn et al., 2022b), and the potential to facilitate discussions across participants where there is likely to be a complex mix of attitudes, experiences, and knowledge influencing this behaviour (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

Despite a wealth of literature looking at factors related to bystander action in physical SV contexts, there is little understanding of intervention in the context of IBSA. The one study to have examined bystander intervention in IBSA contexts considered two forms of

IBSA (i.e., taking and sharing of nude or sexual images) with an Australian sample, and manipulated the content of hypothetical scenarios to allow comparisons regarding the role of gender identity, and non-majority and marginalised groups upon bystander behaviour (Flynn et al., 2022b). Therefore, this study represents a replication and extension of Flynn et al.'s study by considering a wider range of variables through the use of hypothetical scenarios which are broader, more ambiguous in nature, and describe other forms of IBSA perpetration. For example, the scenarios in the current study did not specify the gender of the victim or perpetrator, or indicate how the victim responded in these scenarios, allowing for a more organic and varied discussion within the focus groups regarding these issues. Equally, the sharing scenario in the current study depicts perpetration through the use of technology (i.e., sending an image) rather than showing an image, as in the study by Flynn and colleagues. Further, this study considers all three forms of IBSA (i.e., taking, sharing, or threatening to share nude or sexual images) with a UK sample. Consideration of threats of images being shared is particularly important given the prevalence of this behaviour, as outlined above, and data showing that a large proportion of victims who had received such threats experienced high levels of psychological distress (80%; Henry et al., 2017), and therefore likely needed of the support that a bystander could offer.

In summary, the current research aims to address the following research question: what factors can facilitate or inhibit bystander intervention intent in IBSA contexts, namely the taking, sharing, or making threats to share nude or sexual images without consent?

Method

Participants

Thirty-five university students participated in one of seven focus groups, with between four and eight members per focus group, 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 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 ($n = 6$).

Materials

Participants received a participant information sheet, a data privacy information sheet, consent form, debrief sheet, and a demographic questionnaire. Focus groups were provided with three scenarios, with each scenario asking participants to imagine that they were a bystander to a different form of IBSA: (i) the *non-consensual taking of*; (ii) the *non-consensual sharing of*; and (iii) *threatening to share* nude or sexual images (see scenarios in Appendix). The researcher followed a semi-structured focus group schedule to facilitate the discussions.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via a research participation scheme, posters displayed on a university campus, and word-of-mouth. Participants received course credits (via the research participation scheme) or £10 for taking part. Ethical approval was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee and was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework prior to any 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 split into three parts. Part one focused on how participants would respond to each of the three IBSA scenarios as

bystanders (not reported here; see [citation removed for anonymisation]), and the scenarios were presented sequentially, with the order counterbalanced across the seven focus groups. Part two involved participants considering (i) which of the three scenarios was the most problematic and why, (ii) which they felt most responsible to help with and why, and (iii) what they felt might influence their behaviour and why. Part three involved participants considering whether particular factors would influence their behaviour in response to the incidents (e.g., gender of the victim/perpetrator, presence of other bystanders). At the end of the focus groups, participants were thanked, debriefed, completed the demographic questionnaire, and given a copy of the debrief sheet, which included contact details for relevant services and organisations (e.g., Revenge Porn Helpline) in the unlikely event that participants experienced any distress during the study.

Analysis plan

The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes present within the focus group discussions. Specifically, the stages outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) 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 subthemes (where applicable), with quotes used to exemplify these themes. For each quote, participant gender, focus group

number, and scenario being discussed (i.e., taking, sharing, threatening) is specified.

Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity of the participants. For this study, the term ‘victim’ refers to individuals who have had an 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 sexual 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 nude or sexual images of another person.

Results

When exploring the key facilitators and barriers to bystander action in IBSA contexts, the following themes were identified: *feelings of responsibility, adopting a victim’s perspective, audience inhibition, feelings of safety, negativity towards perpetrator behaviour, bystander relationships, gendered stereotyping, and achieving justice.*

Feelings of Responsibility

This theme relates to feelings of responsibility to intervene as a bystander in these scenarios, and how greater feelings of responsibility results in a greater likelihood of intervention. There are also three subthemes: *moral obligations, diffusion of responsibility, and victim vulnerability.* This theme was present across all focus groups.

Moral Obligations

This subtheme relates to how moral obligations and likely feelings of guilt for not intervening would impact intervention. This subtheme was present across most of the focus groups but was only observed in the taking scenario. Participants stated that they would be motivated to do something to help the victim in this scenario because they would feel extremely guilty if they did not. This suggests that feelings of responsibility and a sense of moral obligation facilitates intervention. As Lauren described, “If you’re seeing that and you don’t do anything, it’s just going to make you feel so guilty...” (f, FG2, taking).

Participants also expressed how they would like to see themselves as good people, and how it is important to look out for and protect others. As such, these beliefs appeared to facilitate intervention. Stacey described how "...too many people are quiet, too many people see injustice and they just stay quiet and it's just like we can't live in a world where it's like you stay quiet." (f, FG3, taking). Amelia similarly described how such interventions may provide a way of "...making ourselves feel better that we actually helped someone ... so that might be one more reason to actually go and help." (f, FG5, taking).

Diffusion of Responsibility

In addition, there were instances in which participants described how they may feel a diffusion of responsibility, which would decrease the likelihood that they would intervene. This subtheme was present across most of the focus groups and was considered in all scenarios. For example, the presence of other bystanders would diffuse feelings of responsibility and therefore act as an inhibitor of intervention. This manifested in slightly different ways depending on the type of scenario. In the taking scenario, participants described feeling more responsible to help if they were the only person who witnessed what was happening, and that if other people saw, they may be less likely to intervene as they think other bystanders may step in. For the sharing scenario, there was a sense that if the image was shared more publicly, they had less of an obligation to act as there was more collective responsibility. Finally, for the threatening scenario, some participants felt that they had a responsibility to help the victim as they may have been the only bystander who the victim confided in:

Amelia: If there is umm a carriage full of people I think I would just kind of distribute the responsibility so I would just think oh maybe the other person saw that too, they're probably thinking the same thing, they'll do something ... so for me, having less people would make me do more. (f, FG5, taking)

Emma: Publicly gives me less feeling of obligation to act myself, if it's been shared on the group chat, then I know that 12 other people have seen it and so I don't feel like

I have to decide what am I going to do ... like I know that it's public so then it's like we have a collective responsibility to act... (f, FG1, sharing)

Anabelle: Also with [threatening scenario], if, if you're the only person they've told then you more or less have like a responsibility to act upon that, but if you know that they have a whole like support group or a network of people that are helping them you don't necessarily have to be there 24/7... (f, FG7, threatening)

Similarly, a greater sense of responsibility was described if participants felt that they had been directly involved or implicated in the situation. Therefore, feeling directly involved in the incident facilitates intervention. Particularly in the sharing and threatening scenarios, there was a sense of being directly implicated as the image was sent to their phone or the victim directly disclosed the threats. Equally, in the taking scenario, being a witness to this behaviour resulted in a sense of feeling directly involved, and therefore a greater sense of responsibility and likelihood of intervention:

Emma: I guess with [sharing scenario], I feel like I'm complicit, like it's on my phone and not responding, or not doing anything, it's almost like saying that that's OK, I'm in agreement with this. It's like no, I need to take some action. (f, FG1, sharing)

Anabelle: ...you are completely involved ... you're seeing all of this happen, you're like watching it, you're observing what's happened, so it's almost like your duty to step in and do something about it... (f, FG7, taking)

Victim Vulnerability

Finally, there were discussions of how perceptions of greater victim vulnerability increased feelings of responsibility, and therefore facilitated intervention. This subtheme was present across all focus groups and was considered in all scenarios. First, vulnerability regarding the victim's lack of awareness of their victimisation was discussed. For the taking and sharing scenarios, participants felt that victims were particularly vulnerable because they were unaware that they were being victimised, and this acted as a facilitator of intervention:

Georgina: ...I need to tell someone that this is happening to them ... if you're on a train, you kind of, you're on your own and in your own little world or whatever, and someone's violating you without your consent, without your knowledge... (f, FG1, taking)

Anabelle: ...it's almost like, your duty to step in and do something about it, especially in the first one [sharing scenario] cause ... people are doing things with their pictures, with their body that they might not even be aware about... (f, FG7, sharing)

Regarding the taking scenario specifically, participants commented on the increased vulnerability of intoxicated victims, and their associated increased feelings of responsibility as bystanders in these situations. Therefore, they felt that they would be more likely to intervene, protect and support an intoxicated victim in this situation. As Poppy described, "I would react more if like, if the person that they were taking a picture of was intoxicated ... that is not OK, they can't really defend themselves..." (f, FG6, taking).

Victim vulnerability was also considered with reference to the extent the nude images were shared in the sharing scenario. Participants described how they would be concerned about who may have seen the images, who the images could be sent to, and the permanency of the images once they have appeared online. This concern and the realisation that images can spread "like wildfire" (Mia, f, FG5, sharing) seemed to facilitate intervention:

Eloise: I think I would ... advise her that she actually does approach the police because ... the ex-partner ... may be considering sending it to kind of a wider circle of people so there may be more damage to be done." (f, FG4, sharing)

Sophia: I mean I'd probably just immediately want to go and tell my friend that this horrible thing has just happened and that they need to watch out like something bad could really come of this, like maybe they sent it to somebody else... (f, FG5, sharing)

Concerns regarding further sharing of these images encouraged some participants to direct their intervention towards the perpetrator, such as finding out who else they had sent the images to or trying to stop them from doing so. As Imogen stated, "I'd want to know who else they'd sent it to, I think I would ask them that, because obviously that's like really important for the friend to know..." (f, FG1, sharing). Logan had similar thoughts regarding confronting the perpetrator due to concerns over the spreading of the image, "I think I would probably tell them that it had been sent to me but my overall reaction to try and dissuade them from sending it to anyone else..." (m, FG6, sharing).

Finally, across all scenarios, participants felt the age of the victim would be an important consideration. Specifically, they felt that perpetration against a child would be worse and that as bystanders, they would be obliged to intervene because such behaviour would constitute the handling or creation of child exploitation material, and therefore if the victim is under 18, this acts as a facilitator of intervention. As Georgina described, “if the person ... is under 18 ... you’ve received child pornography, so you’ve got an obligation...” (f, FG1, sharing).

Adopting a Victim’s Perspective

This theme relates to understanding a victim’s perspective and how doing so would facilitate intervention. This theme has two subthemes: *victim empathy* and *victim agency*. This theme was present across all focus groups.

Victim Empathy

This subtheme relates to empathy for the victim and how such feelings would facilitate intervention and was present across all focus groups. In all scenarios, participants adopted the victim’s perspective to understand how they would feel. Displays of empathy ranged from consideration of their emotional responses (e.g., “[I] would be so upset...”; Lola, f, FG6, sharing), to concern about the impact of others seeing the images (e.g., “I’d be mortified ... if my parents saw explicit pictures of me, I’d just want to die...”; Frankie, f, FG4, threatening), to how they would want others to react (e.g., “I would want someone to cover [me], I would want someone to tell me.”; Ola, f, FG3, taking). All displays of empathy appeared to facilitate intervention. As Emma described, “I guess my main motivation was like if it was me I’d want someone ... to do something...” (f, FG1, taking). Logan and Lexi described similar considerations:

Lexi: ...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”, and tell the person in the aisle that someone is trying to take a picture of them ... I feel like they

have the right to know ... if I was in that situation, I'd want someone to tell me, I wouldn't want someone to have a picture of me and not know about it at all. (f, FG2, taking)

Logan: I think with number 2 [shared scenario] ... you [either] have the choice of making your friend aware or not ... I personally would ... I'd want to know about it ... especially if they're still holding images of me after we've split up, like I'd still want to know... (m, FG6, sharing)

Participants also empathised with victims by considering the potential consequences of being a victim in these scenarios. Although the potential consequences were considered in all scenarios, most discussions related to the sharing and threatening scenarios. Specifically, participants described how they would be concerned about the victim's mental health and wellbeing, which would facilitate intervention and dictate what kind of action to take. In many cases, concerns for wellbeing acted as a facilitator of supportive actions towards the victim. Amelia described how concerns for her friend would encourage supportive action, "Before I do all of that I would just try and see how my friend is, if they're stable at the moment ... I mean it is quite emotional..." (f, FG5, threatening). Hope described similar concerns and supportive actions:

Hope: ...I'll try to calm the situation down kind of thing cause it's like they're probably going to be really freaked out too, and the best thing to do is to stay calm I guess, help them ... as much as you can. (f, FG7, sharing)

Furthermore, participants considered how certain types of intervention could impact the victim. For example, in the threatening scenario, participants were concerned that approaching the perpetrator could lead to them leaking the photos in retaliation, thereby acting as an inhibitor of engaging in this type of intervention:

Georgina: That's what my concern would be, if you contacted the ex or if you contacted them and just said 'look I know what you're doing', they'd just be like, they'd have known that your friend had spoken to you, and they'd be like ... could then be more threatening or send the photos. (f, FG1, threatening)

Equally, in the threatening scenario, participants commented that the advice they would give to the victim would depend on the relationship between the victim and the

recipient of the images, as well as the cultural or religious views of the victim and those who may see the images. For example, participants were less likely to suggest telling the parents if this would put the victim in danger for cultural or religious reasons, or if the victim's parents would not be sympathetic to their situation. Therefore, relationship and cultural considerations could act as inhibitors of providing particular types of advice:

Lexi: Not everyone's parents would probably be understanding about the situation and maybe there might be a kind of like blaming of the victim like 'it's your, kind of your fault for sending the pictures in the first place, like you've kind of put yourself in that situation', so I feel like it really depends on the persons relationship with their parents. (f, FG2, threatening)

Emma: ...but that depends on the nature of the images ... there are cultures and situations and communities within which they might just not be OK, that could be a death sentence, it could certainly be the end of your relationship... (f, FG1, threatening)

Victim Agency

In addition, concerns for the victim's agency facilitated particular actions. This subtheme was present across all focus groups and was considered in all scenarios. Across most of the focus groups, participants stressed the importance of victims being aware of their victimisation so that they can decide how best to respond. For example, participants described how they would inform the victim of the situation in the taking and sharing scenarios because the victim had the right to know what was going on. This suggests that beliefs regarding the importance of victim awareness acts as a facilitator of intervention. As Anabelle described, "I would inform that person of what's, like what's happening just because they deserve to know what's happening with their own images and their body, and like that being shared..." (f, FG7, sharing). Similarly, in the taking scenario, participants described how the importance of victim awareness would facilitate actions directed towards informing the victim of what is happening:

Troy: The thing about addressing the person in the aisle is that you can inform them of what is actually happening in case they don't know, so then they can react in a way

that feels appropriate to them. They can take the action they feel they need to towards the person that is doing that. (m, FG7, taking)

Relatedly, concerns regarding how the victim would want to handle the situation facilitated asking and engaging with the victim to determine the type of intervention they would prefer in all scenarios. As Amy described, "...listen to what they want ... what your friend is happy to do, not happy to do..." (f, FG2, threatening). Georgina also showed evidence of being concerned for the victim's wishes in the taking scenario, "I think I'd try and capture the attention of the person who was being photographed, ... and then I'd tell them what happened, and let them decide..." (f, FG1, taking). Participants discussed how they would seek permission from the victim before reporting to the police in both the sharing and threatening scenarios. As Imogen described, "Yeah they might want to report it themselves, but you could like support them, even reporting it, but I don't think I'd report it without speaking to them." (f, FG1, sharing).

In contrast, some participants discussed how the victim's wishes would not always impact their actions. For example, they described how it would be 'morally correct' to make the perpetrator aware of the unacceptability of their behaviour, irrespective of the victim's preference. This subtheme links to the aforementioned subtheme 'moral obligations', with participants' concern for engaging in morally correct actions overriding the victim's wishes. As George explained, "It's kind of a moral right and moral duty to kind of to speak up against this, even if the victim doesn't, in the moment, appreciate that." (m, FG4, taking). Such beliefs allow bystanders to focus on the greater good:

Lauren: You don't want to go behind their back, and like straight away tell the police ... but if like their safety's in danger and they are still really kind of like holding things back, and they don't want to let people know ... I feel like you should look out for your friend ... at least then ... you've potentially prevented something actually like worse than the initial threat from happening. (f, FG2, threatening)

Audience Inhibition

This theme relates to feelings of audience inhibition and how these feelings would inhibit intervention as bystanders. This theme was present across most of the focus groups. For the taking scenario, participants described how they would feel apprehensive because they would not want to embarrass themselves in front of other bystanders, particularly if they misunderstood the situation, thereby inhibiting intervention:

Amelia: I think for me it would be easier if it was only three of us because then I would feel more in charge, and I wouldn't be as scared as what other people think of me then for causing maybe a scene... (f, FG5, taking)

Equally, participants described how they would worry that other bystanders would not help them if they did decide to intervene. Therefore, fears that other bystanders would be apathetic acted as a barrier to intervention:

Eloise: Something else that would make me hesitate umm, would be fear of how the other passengers would respond because I would actually be scared that it would be me umm, shouting or raising my voice and the other passengers would remain silent. (f, FG4, taking)

Additionally, participants described how they may feel a sense of audience inhibition because of the presence of the victim in the taking scenario. Specifically, they were concerned that the victim may not want them to make a fuss or that the victim would respond negatively to their intervention, thereby embarrassing themselves. This concern acted as a barrier for intervention. As Katie described, "...that's what I'm worried about ... what if they don't mind, like then I just look stupid?" (f, FG3, taking). This theme links to the subtheme of 'victim agency', as participants' concern about the reaction of the victim was reflected in their desire to understand how the victim would want them to respond.

Conversely, there were instances where having other bystanders present would facilitate intervention. Participants across a couple of focus groups commented on how the presence of other bystanders may increase their confidence and feelings of 'power' because they would be able to confirm what was happening or discuss how best to respond to the

situation. This applied to both the taking and sharing scenarios:

Sophia: I know that in the case of if there were more people ... they would acknowledge it and react ... I'm much more likely to react as well because obviously you've got that support from the people around you... (f, FG5, taking)

Emma: If [the photo] has just been sent to me, the only people I can talk to are the person in the images or the person who sent it to me ... but if I know that everyone's seen it then I can offline message you and go 'holy shit did you see what he just sent us, or what are we going to do? ...', and then I just feel like I've got more of a community with me. (f, FG1, sharing)

Feelings of Safety

This theme relates to the feelings of safety as a bystander in these scenarios and how this would impact the likelihood of intervention. This theme was present across all focus groups. Participants described how fear for their own safety as a bystander would be a barrier to intervention or would impact their choice of intervention in all scenarios. For example, Georgina stated, "if I was concerned for like my safety, or the safety of the person in the image, I probably wouldn't confront the person..." (f, FG1, sharing). Generally, fears of safety were borne out of concerns that the perpetrator may react negatively or violently to any intervention behaviour:

Stacey: Like 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 like that, I would go straight to the [victim], and be like 'hey, umm this guy next to you is trying to take a picture of you, I would suggest like you move or anything' or I'll try and cover her... (f, FG3, taking)

Sophia: I suppose at that point it could depend on umm what this ex is like if you know the ex-well, then you might be more likely to confront them about it, especially if you don't think they're particularly violent. (f, FG5, threatening)

Conversely, some participants commented that safety concerns would not inhibit intervention, particularly in the taking scenario. As Katie described, "I would slap his phone I'm not going to lie. No I wouldn't care, literally, even if he's rough." (f, FG3, taking).

In addition, participants focused on two situational characteristics that would impact the risk of safety in the taking scenario and would therefore impact the likelihood of

intervention. First, participants suggested that perpetrators would be more of a threat if they were intoxicated. Specifically, they felt that there was a greater risk of violence from an intoxicated perpetrator and as a result, this would act as a barrier to confronting the perpetrator. As Bella described, “if the person taking the photo was drunk I wouldn’t approach them, like I wouldn’t at all.” (f, FG1, taking). Similarly, Ola described her hesitation, “I would be less likely to do anything because ... I find people who are drunk scary and like unpredictable, and so I would feel less likely to be able to do anything.” (f, FG3, taking). Alternative courses of action were also considered in these situations, such as approaching the victim instead:

Anabelle: [If] it was the person taking the picture who was intoxicated ... alcohol can exacerbate a lot of things and emotions that could then also put me in danger, so ... maybe I shouldn’t necessarily approach this person, maybe still go towards the person whose picture’s being taken and say ‘listen, this person looks like they’re intoxicated, maybe just, get on a different bus [train]’. (f, FG7, taking)

Second, participants described how the presence of other bystanders would impact assessments of safety in the taking scenario. Although the presence of other bystanders tended to inhibit intervention through feelings of audience inhibition, as previously outlined, there were some cases in which the presence of other bystanders facilitated intervention. For example, participants commented on how they would feel safer if there were other bystanders present and how this would make them more likely to intervene. This was primarily because participants believed other bystanders could support them if the perpetrator retaliated:

Nicola: I’d just get up, if I was with somebody or a group of people I might do something more, but on my own I would probably get up and just walk away ... I’d be scared I might get it wrong, and ... the repercussions of that... (f, FG1, taking)

Mia: I saw someone was being upskirted and they were going up the stairs and they were behind the girl, and I was with a group of friends, and we just shouted at them and like chased them and they went away ... if I was on my own I don’t know if I’d do that cause maybe that person gets aggressive. (f, FG5, taking)

Negativity Towards Perpetrator Behaviour

This theme relates to the bystander's emotional reactions to the perpetrator's behaviour and how these reactions would impact their own behaviour. This theme was present across all focus groups and was considered in all scenarios. Importantly, participants expressed negativity towards the perpetrator's behaviour with strong emotional reactions. The most common emotional reaction was anger towards the perpetrator, and this appeared to be a strong facilitating factor for intervention in all scenarios. In the sharing and threatening scenarios, given the context of a previous intimate relationship, many felt anger towards this behaviour and felt that such actions were a violation of trust and respect. Georgina described how these emotions would facilitate intervention, "I don't think it's right; I'd be so angry that it's such a violation of trust ... I'd be furious and that's why I'd probably react that way..." (f, FG1, sharing). In the taking scenario, participants described feeling disgusted by the behaviour, which also facilitated intervention. As Lauren described, "[I would react in that way] because it's wrong, like it's just disgusting ... no one deserves to feel like that or have that done to them cause it's just wrong." (f, FG2, taking).

Relatedly, participants described how their desire for the perpetrator to be punished and understand that their behaviour is unacceptable would facilitate intervention:

Nina: I think another reason to [intervene], I don't want the ex-partner to like get away with it, cause ... if you don't like ... help or like sort it out then they think they can get away with that kind of thing or influence their people around their group to do the same thing. (f, FG7, sharing)

Bystander Relationships

This theme relates to the relationships of the bystander with the victim and perpetrator and how these would impact the likelihood of intervention. This theme was present across all focus groups and considered in all scenarios. When considering their relationship with the victim, participants emphasised the importance of helping the victim irrespective of their relationship, suggesting that the relationship with the victim is neither facilitative nor

inhibitive. As Frankie described, “Even somebody I don’t know very well ... I would tell them because it’s the right thing to do and it doesn’t cost me anything...” (f, FG4, sharing).

Similar views were expressed in response to the taking and threatening scenarios:

Lauren: Even when they’re strangers ... it’s just about respect ... even though you’ve never seen this person in your life, you respect them enough to just tell them what’s going on because no one deserves to feel like that or have that done to them cause it’s just wrong. (f, FG2, taking)

Ola: I mean maybe if you weren’t as close a friend, but even then, like if someone discloses that information to me, like even if they were like just an acquaintance ... I would still be like, ‘no let’s try and do something’... (f, FG3, threatening)

However, participants commented on how they would likely offer the victim more support and be more confrontational with the perpetrator if they had a personal relationship with the victim, as they would experience greater empathy, loyalty, and feelings of anger. This suggests that being friends with the victim can act as a facilitator for intervention. As Poppy described, “...if I was friends with them, like close friends, I would approach it differently ... my reaction would be different, it would be more aggressive towards the person that posted it...” (f, FG6, sharing). Frankie described how levels of support will depend on her relationship with the victim, “I think definitely here you’d support your friend and depending on how close a friend you are on the level of support you give them...” (f, FG4, sharing).

Many also felt that it would be harder to intervene or approach the victim if they did not know them, further suggesting that when the victim is a stranger, this can act as a barrier for intervention:

Frankie: I think this [sharing scenario] is much easier than the [taking scenario] which is in a public space with a stranger and you’re having to make judgements about what to do ... it’s quite clear, you support your friend... (f, FG4, sharing)

When considering their relationship with the perpetrator, participants felt that they would be more likely to confront the perpetrator if they knew them or were friends with them.

This suggests that being friends with the perpetrator can facilitate intervention. As Imogen described, "...if I was friends with the ex-partner that might even motivate me more ... I'd be more motivated to tell them that it's not OK because you can't have friends acting like that and thinking it's OK." (f, FG1, sharing). Similarly, Troy commented, "[if] the ex-partners in particular are some kind of friends, former friends, or very close acquaintances, I personally definitely feel more of a drive to go and talk to them, go and address this problem directly." (m, FG7, sharing and threatening).

Gendered Stereotyping

This theme relates to the impact of the gender of the victim and perpetrator, and the associated influence of gendered stereotyping on bystander intervention. Overall, this theme was present across most of the focus groups and considered in all scenarios.

Participants described how the gender of the perpetrator and the gender of the victim impacts how others, including themselves, perceive the behaviour and are likely to respond. Participants spoke of being more likely to react, and to react faster, when the victim is female compared to male, thereby showing that if the victim is female, this can act as a facilitator for intervention. As Lucy explained, "I feel like if ... it was a female like, that was getting violated my reaction time would be faster than if it was a man..." (f, FG2, taking). Such actions were often driven by participants' feeling more protective of female victims because they believed they may feel more vulnerable than males would (e.g., the perception that males are less bothered by the behaviour or can look after themselves), and the consequences for female victims were believed to be worse than they are for males (e.g., females would be 'slut shamed' whereas males may not). As Stacey explained, "We don't want to admit it but it's like you wouldn't react the same ... like you would want to but then if you're actually put in that situation like I know that maybe I wouldn't be as protective..." (f, FG3, taking). Harry described similar barriers when intervening for a male victim in the threatening scenario:

Harry: If it's a ... potentially abusive boyfriend I just feel that it's perhaps easier to protect the girl, if it's potentially an abusive girlfriend even though I understand that it's not the assumption you should make, but it's the assumption perhaps the boy can look after himself. (m, FG5, threatening)

However, some participants felt that the gender of the victim would not change their behaviour and would neither facilitate nor inhibit intervention. As Lily described, "For me it was the sexual part, so if they would be like a man and woman ... both of them are in skirts, cause it's the only way you can compare ... I would react the same way." (f, FG4, taking).

Regarding perpetrator gender, for the taking scenario, participants suggested that they would be less likely to intervene or make a fuss if it was a female perpetrator compared to a male perpetrator, therefore showing that a female perpetrator can act as a barrier for intervention. As 'Frankie' explained, "...if I saw a woman take a photo of a man, I don't think I'd think anything of it, I think I would just ignore it..." (f, FG4, taking). In this scenario, participants described how they would likely give a female perpetrator the benefit of the doubt, assuming that the individuals knew each other or that the perpetrator was doing something else with their phone.

Emma: If I thought I saw a woman trying to upskirt someone, I'd probably be more hesitant to be like 'surely she's not', whereas ... if it was a man I'd be like 'you dirty bastard' and I'd be more quick to trust my gut... (f, FG1, taking)

Participants also commented that female perpetrators would be viewed as more likely to have non-malicious and non-sexual intentions, unlike male perpetrators:

Hope: If it was like the way round that it was a female taking a picture of a male, you would give her more benefit of the doubt that like they maybe know each other and that it was a joke. (m, FG7, taking)

Overall, such feelings are likely due to the societal norms of the non-prototypical nature of a female perpetrating against a male, and the ramifications and judgements being less well-known:

Sophia: It's already established I think in society if we saw a guy taking advantage of a girl that, that's wrong but if we saw it the other way around we perhaps wouldn't

know what to think about it ... we might convince ourselves that it wasn't really what we saw. (f, FG5, taking)

Anabelle: Especially with the society and air that we live in right now, there's a lot more of an uproar with women have to protect women ... and most of the cases it's where a male is taking an unsolicited picture of a female, and that's what like we're conditioned to think so that's what you'd probably notice more and want to intervene to stop it... (f, FG7, taking)

Achieving Justice

This final theme relates to the impact of perceived justice outcomes upon the likelihood of engaging with the police as bystanders. This theme was present across most of the focus groups and considered in all scenarios, suggesting that the likelihood of engaging in this form of bystander action related to the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Generally, participants who would involve the police expected them to help the situation, therefore perceptions of positive justice outcomes facilitated this type of intervention. This only occurred for the sharing and threatening scenarios. For example, participants described how the police may be able to stop photos being shared by the perpetrator in these scenarios. As 'Stacey' explained, "I would probably tell my friend, 'Go to the police, let's try and get his phone taken off of him before he can leak anything'..." (f, FG3, threatening). Therefore, police involvement was considered a way to control the situation and limit future damage:

Eloise: ...maybe advise her that she actually does approach the police ... because if the ex-partner has only sent one photo they may either have more photos to send ... they may be considering sending it to kind of a wider circle of people so there may be more damage to be done... (f, FG4, sharing)

Despite a willingness to involve the police, this was not always considered to be an effective way to handle the situation. Participants gave a variety of reasons, but their most common concern was that the police would not be effective, and these concerns acted as barriers for this type of intervention in all three scenarios. In the threatening scenario, most were concerned that the police would not respond quickly enough to stop the images being

shared, or that involving the police would cause unnecessary escalation of the situation:

Lucy: The initial thing needs to be stopped first, like the police aren't going to be that fast, like they're going to start investigating but by that time my man might even feel threatened, like 'oh I know you've got the police involved, now I'm definitely going to send it'. (f, FG2, threatening)

In addition to these concerns, participants discussed how they may be hesitant to involve the police because the legal process can be difficult for the victim in all three scenarios. They commented that the process can be extremely long, that it can be difficult to prove the behaviour, and that more people will see these images if the victim pursues a conviction (e.g., police, jury). Again, in this case, concerns regarding the legal process for victims of IBSA inhibited this type of intervention:

Nicola: ...I think that was my first reaction [involve the police], although initially I think I would ... show concern for the friend before I even went there, because you know once you start the legal process, it could be long and complicated... (f, FG1, sharing)

Lexi: ...if they are still in touch with their partner or their ex-partner and talk to them about it, I feel like that's probably the first route ... instead of taking it straight to the police ... because if you file a report, there's going to be a lot in the open, maybe they won't like, feel comfortable sharing that with the police... (f, FG2, threatening)

These concerns are clearly linked to the 'victim empathy' subtheme as the participants considered how the legal process may be difficult for the victim and thereby empathising with them.

Discussion

The current findings have highlighted a range of facilitators and barriers to bystander intervention in the context of IBSA. The facilitators and barriers identified are summarised below and considered in the context of previous research and theory. The implications of these findings, limitations, and future recommendations for research are then discussed.

Facilitators of Intervention

The current study identified the following facilitators of bystander intervention in IBSA contexts: feelings of responsibility, victim empathy, consideration of victim agency, anger towards the behaviour and perpetrator, a personal relationship with the victim and perpetrator, and perceptions of positive justice outcomes.

The findings suggest that greater feelings of responsibility, evidenced through discussions of moral obligations, guilt, and feelings of direct involvement, facilitate intervention. This supports previous research in both physical SV and IBSA contexts (e.g., Burn, 2009; Flynn et al., 2022b). Additionally, in physical SV contexts, bystanders who have not intervened when they have had the opportunity to do so have positioned themselves as an ‘outsider’ to the incident, describing themselves as an observer of the behaviour rather than being directly involved (Lamb & Attwell, 2019). This aligns with the facilitative nature of feeling directly involved in an incident shown in the current study and suggests that these feelings are important in IBSA contexts too. Further, consistent with Flynn et al. this finding provides support for step three of the Bystander Intervention Model (Latané & Darley, 1970) in its application to IBSA contexts. This study also found that an increase in feeling responsible to help can be facilitated by acknowledgements of victim vulnerabilities. Specifically, the findings highlighted vulnerabilities which are unique to IBSA contexts: victim lack of awareness of victimisation, such as when images are taken or shared without the victim’s knowledge, and the extent of image-sharing, such as who the images are sent to and the permanency of images once online.

Alongside the facilitative nature of feeling responsibility to intervene, further bystander cognitions that can facilitate intervention are those of empathising with the victim and having concerns for victim agency. Regarding empathy, the findings suggest that empathy for the victim facilitates intervention. This has also been found in physical SV and IBSA contexts (e.g., Flynn et al., 2022b; Kaya et al., 2019; Yule et al., 2020). Although

aligning with past research, nuances of displays of victim empathy were highlighted, such as concerns for the victim's mental health and wellbeing and potential costs to the victim depending on the actions they took. In the threatening scenario, participants voiced concern for how the perpetrator may react towards the victim if they intervened by confronting them. This shows how threats to share images presents a unique situation for bystanders in that they are at the mercy of these threats. Also applicable in the threatening scenario, actions were informed by empathising with the victim's cultural or religious context, or the relationship between the victim and the recipient of the images, which impacted the advice they would give to the victim. A recent study found that victims who had experienced the sharing of nude or sexual images without consent from very conservative cultures were treated extremely harshly by family and friends, and some reported experiencing physical violence as a result (Aborisade, 2021). This suggests that certain actions are not always appropriate given the victim's wider context and it is encouraging that participants were empathetic towards this nuance.

In addition to victim empathy, concerns for victim agency were discussed as a facilitator of intervention. Participants felt it was important for victims to be aware of their victimisation so they could make appropriate decisions in how to respond for themselves. These findings are particularly encouraging given that controlling actions of third-parties towards victims of SV, such as forcing them to engage with the police, results in victims being more likely to experience negative mental wellbeing (Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2014). Conversely, in some cases participants felt that the greater good, outweighed concerns for what the victim would want. These conflicting viewpoints highlight the complexities that bystanders may face when deciding whether to engage in positive bystander action.

When considering the role of situational factors, such as relationships, the current study found that bystanders are more likely to provide support to victims whom they are

friends with, and equally, be more likely to confront a perpetrator who is a friend. These findings somewhat align with those of past research. In physical SV contexts, evidence consistently shows that having a personal relationship with the victim increases the likelihood of intervention (Labhardt et al., 2017; Mainwaring et al., 2022). Equally, in IBSA contexts, Flynn et al. (2022b) found that intervention was more likely when the victim or perpetrator was a friend of the bystander, which aligns with the current findings. Conversely, the role of relationship with the perpetrator in physical SV contexts has been less consistent, which may be due to the variety of bystander actions considered across the literature, and the differential impact of relationship with the perpetrator, upon these actions (Mainwaring et al., 2022). At this stage, it is unclear whether the facilitative role of having a relationship with a perpetrator is unique to IBSA contexts, or whether it similarly relies on the actions being considered, with more severe responses, such as involving the police, being less likely in situations where friends are perpetrating the behaviour, as has been demonstrated in research looking at cases of sexual assault (Nicksa, 2014). This is something to be followed up in future research. Further, some participants in the current study highlighted the importance of intervention irrespective of their relationship with the victim. Given this conflict, future research using an experimental design would allow one to confirm whether a bystanders' relationship with the individuals involved affects their behavioural intentions to intervene.

The final facilitator identified, perceptions of positive justice outcomes, would increase the likelihood of bystander engagement with the police or criminal justice system, and conversely, perceptions of negative outcomes or experiences for the victim would decrease the likelihood of engagement in these actions. Specifically, participants were concerned about the speed with which the police would handle threats and empathised with the victim in regard to the difficulties they may face if they involve the police, such as the images being viewed by others and with the crimes being difficult to prove. These barriers for

victims have also been identified by relevant stakeholders (Henry et al., 2018), suggesting that bystanders are attuned to the potential difficulties that victims may face when engaging with the police.

Barriers to Intervention

The current study identified the following barriers of intervention: the presence of other bystanders, fears for safety, and a female perpetrator and male victim. Regarding the presence of other bystanders, this was identified as a situational factor that would inhibit the likelihood of intervention, particularly in the taking scenario. Specifically, the presence of other bystanders would result in a diffusion of responsibility and an increase in audience inhibition, which would then inhibit intervention. Diffusion of responsibility in the presence of other bystanders has been found in physical SV contexts (e.g., Kaya et al., 2019). Equally, audience inhibition was found to inhibit bystander intervention in physical SV contexts (e.g., Burn, 2009; Mainwaring et al., 2022). These barriers are also outlined in the Bystander Intervention Model (Burn, 2009; Latané & Darley, 1970), with the current study providing further support for the application of this model in IBSA contexts. However, in the current study, audience inhibition was not only related to the presence of other bystanders.

Participants displayed feelings of audience inhibition in the presence of the victim for the taking scenario, with concerns about embarrassing the victim or unknowingly going against the wishes of the victim. This brings into question whether such barriers exist only in the presence of other bystanders, or whether such concerns can arise even when solely in the presence of the victim and perpetrator.

Concerns for personal safety was a barrier to intervention for most participants, in line with previous research from both physical SV and IBSA contexts (e.g., Flynn et al., 2022b; Mainwaring et al., 2022). However, when in the presence of other bystanders, this concern was minimised. This nuance was also identified in Flynn et al. Furthermore, the presence of

bystanders was not always identified as a barrier. Some participants felt that the presence of bystanders would increase their confidence, in being able to confirm or discuss what was happening and how best to respond, particularly in the context of non-consensual taking and sharing. Overall, the lack of clarity with which the presence of other bystanders impacts bystander intervention has also been found in the physical SV literature (Mainwaring et al., 2022) which further supports the suggestion that this can act as both a facilitator and barrier. These mixed findings highlight the need for greater empirical attention to potential mediating and moderating variables.

Finally, many participants felt that witnessing a female perpetrator taking an image without consent would act as a barrier to intervention due to giving them the benefit of the doubt or by assuming their intentions were not malicious or sexual in nature. These doubts and assumptions of non-malicious intentions has been shown in IBSA contexts previously (Flynn et al., 2022b). Equally, although not always expressed, many participants identified female victims as being more likely to receive help in these scenarios compared to male victims. This was due to feeling more protective of female victims as they believe them to be more vulnerable and likely to experience more severe consequences. Greater likelihood of intervention for female victims has also been found in physical SV contexts (e.g., Katz, 2015; Savage et al., 2017).

Implications

The current study has important theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the range of facilitators and barriers identified in the current study demonstrate support for the use of more holistic models in explaining bystander behaviour, such as the Bystander Action Coils Model (Banyard, 2015). Although support was demonstrated for some elements of the Bystander Intervention Model (Latané & Darley, 1970), there were additional attitudinal and internal processes, and further situational factors

identified as being important in determining the likelihood of bystander intervention. It is important for research to continue utilising a more holistic approach to investigating bystander behaviour, given that strategies focused on bystander intervention as a tool for prevention should take into account the wide variety of facilitators and barriers of bystander intervention to increase the effectiveness of these programmes (Banyard, 2015).

Relatedly, the findings have important implications for the development of bystander intervention programmes and materials for IBSA contexts. Specifically, bystander intervention can be encouraged by minimising the barriers and maximising the facilitators that have been identified in the current study, a few of which are outlined here. First, bystander intervention programmes would benefit from increasing personal feelings of responsibility to intervene when faced with incidents of IBSA. For example, trying to encourage bystanders to feel a greater sense of involvement in incidents of IBSA even when they have not been sent images directly. Given that images are most commonly shared via Facebook and SMS (Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2017), reduced feelings of direct involvement online may be prevalent, thereby fostering an environment whereby this barrier prevails. Equally, it is important for future research to consider the role of the presence of cyber-bystanders in online IBSA contexts, particularly given the large percentage of incidents that take place online, the likelihood of cyber-bystanders being present, and the potentially inhibiting nature of this. Further, encouraging greater feelings of victim empathy, understanding the importance of victim agency, and education on the negative impacts of IBSA victimisation would help increase the likelihood of intervention.

In addition to targeting the bystander and their own cognitions, there are implications for practice informed by bystander perceptions of the victim and perpetrator. For example, it is important that bystander intervention programmes address the role of gendered stereotypes wherein potential bystanders are educated about common misperceptions relating to victim

and perpetrator gender and their motivations. Particularly, that males and females are just as likely to be victims of IBSA, that the motivations of male and female perpetrators do not differ, and that motivations to engage in IBSA are often not malicious (Henry et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

Three limitations of the current study are worthy of comment, one relates to the use of a focus group methodology and the others relate to the generalisability of the findings. First, the use of focus groups relied on the participants' ability to be interoceptive when considering how particular factors may influence their behaviour. Therefore, it is possible that these are reflective of personal ideals and misrepresentative of actual behaviour, thereby reducing the validity of the findings. Equally, it is possible that responses were influenced by the presence of the other focus group members, encouraging responses that align with the majority viewpoint. However, these concerns are partially assuaged by the alignment between some of the current findings and those in the study by Flynn and colleagues (2022a) which looked at actual bystander intervention, whereby participants reported the actions they took and why via an anonymous survey.

Further, in relying on participants' interoceptive ability, focus groups are not well-suited to gaining an understanding of how some individual and contextual factors may influence behaviour. For example, it would be difficult for an individual to reflect on how their own gender impacts intervention. However, as mentioned previously, the focus group method was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on a complex mix of attitudes, experiences, and knowledge that influence behaviour (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). In confirming or developing the current findings, future experimental research should examine the influence of pertinent factors, such as those identified here. Equally, consideration of the lived experiences of bystanders to IBSA could address the limitations of using a focus group methodology and confirm the role of the aforementioned facilitators and

barriers, whilst also allowing further exploration of more sensitive facilitators and barriers that may not be appropriate for focus group discussions, such as how own victimisation and perpetration experiences could impact willingness to intervene.

The second and third limitations concern the generalisability of the findings to other bystanders, IBSA contexts, and forms of intervention. First, the sample in the current study was majority-white, female, and heterosexual, therefore the application of these findings to non-white, male, or sexual minorities is limited. Although there were no discernible differences across female-only and mixed-gender focus groups, the small number of male participants and absence of male-only focus groups may limit the generalisability of the findings to male bystanders. Given some evidence that females are more likely to intervene in SV contexts (see Mainwaring et al., 2022), future research using a more gender-balanced sample is needed. Further, as some preliminary evidence has shown that ethnic and sexual minority groups are more likely to be victims of IBSA (Powell et al., 2020), it is important that future research investigates this further given the role this could play in the facilitators and barriers for these demographic groups.

Second, although the scenarios used were quite broad, there are still limits to the generalisability of the findings to other IBSA contexts. For example, in the sharing scenario, participants may have inferred that the photo was being shared with malicious intent as the victim and the perpetrator had ended their relationship. Previous research in physical SV contexts has shown that indicators of a perpetrator's malicious intention can encourage intervention (e.g., Butler et al., 2017). If such a detail acts as a facilitator to intervention, this may have concealed barriers in contexts where the perpetrators motivations are less obvious but equally reflective of real-life examples of IBSA. Further, perpetrators of IBSA report engaging in this behaviour for many reasons such as to be funny or sexy or to impress their friends (Henry et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important that future research give due attention

to instances of IBSA where there is no implied malice on behalf of the perpetrator to provide greater insight into facilitators and barriers where bystander intervention may be less likely but still just as important. Finally, the current study was limited in its ability to distinguish which facilitators and barriers apply to each type of intervention behaviour. As outlined in Mainwaring et al. (2023), intervention can take many different forms, therefore it is likely that the influence of these factors will vary depending on the action being considered by the bystander. This could be addressed in future research using experimental methods whereby facilitators and barriers are manipulated and the differential impact on different types of intervention behaviour are measured.

Conclusion

This study explored factors that facilitate and inhibit bystander action in the context of three different IBSA scenarios. A range of factors have been identified, many of which mirror those found in physical SV contexts, such as the role of feelings of responsibility, victim empathy, and relationships. However, there are also factors which have not previously been considered, some of which appear to be unique to IBSA contexts, such as the victim's vulnerability regarding the extent of the sharing of the images and concern for victim agency. These findings have important implications for practice, including the development of educational programmes and materials which can address factors that facilitate and inhibit bystander intervention. Specifically, programmes should encourage bystanders to feel responsible and empathetic towards victims of IBSA and educate them on the negative impacts of IBSA. It is also important to evaluate any training or educational materials that incorporate these factors, to provide greater insight into this behaviour in helping to prevent IBSA and the associated negative impacts upon victims.

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