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# “It Spread Like Wildfire, as These Things Do”: Exploring Mechanisms of Harm in Young Norwegians’ Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

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## ABSTRACT

It is widely reported that image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) victimization is linked to a wide range of detrimental outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. However, knowledge about what shapes victims’ experiences remains limited. To explore underlying mechanisms of harm in IBSA incidents, the present study drew on the concept of appraisal to elucidate the various meanings that victims attach to IBSA. For this purpose, we carried out a reflexive thematic analysis of 20 individual in-depth interviews with young male and female victims (ages 16–26) of IBSA. Using this approach, we developed four overarching themes that capture participants’ experiences of being (1) robbed of bodily autonomy, (2) stripped of privacy, (3) subjected to public scrutiny, and (4) trapped in a state of uncertainty. By delineating the different ways that participants appraised and experienced each of these “layers of victimization,” our findings show how the harms of IBSA may be shaped by a complex constellation of situational, personal, and cultural structures and conditions. Importantly, as some of these mechanisms are socially constructed, our findings indicate that efforts aimed at reducing negative outcomes of IBSA should address the interpersonal and cultural context of these incidents, including bystander responses to intimate image dissemination.

I think I went into shock actually. Yeah, I was shocked. I felt nauseous. I felt that I was going to throw up. I started shaking. My heart was pounding. I had difficulty breathing. It was very physical. It was very intense.

The above account was given by “Oda,” a young woman who, in her early 20s, discovered that multiple sexually suggestive photos of her had been stolen from her e-mail account and published online. Between 2020 and 2021, we interviewed her and 19 other individuals about their experiences of having private intimate images disseminated against their will. Like Oda, most participants recounted suffering acute emotional stress upon learning that nude or otherwise sexual photos or videos of them had been distributed to others without their consent. Across interviews, this discovery was tied to a range of negative emotions, including shock, disbelief, confusion, uneasiness, panic, fear, hopelessness, sadness, annoyance, and anger. Participants also recounted experiencing several physical symptoms of stress, such as nausea, stomach knots, dry mouth, shaking, heart palpitations, and breathing difficulties. However, beyond this initial discomfort, participants’ narratives demonstrated considerable variation with regard to the nature, severity, and duration of the distress caused by the image dissemination. The purpose of this study was to elucidate how and why their experiences differed.

## Background

With the emergence of the Internet, age-old social phenomena have not only seeped into the digital sphere – some have also mutated and thrived in this novel milieu. An example of this is the nonconsensual dissemination of intimate images and other

forms of *image-based sexual abuse* (IBSA; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017). Although instances of IBSA have been documented for more than a century (e.g., Le Grange Brown’s Pictures, 1888), it did not become a widespread social problem until the development and diffusion of digital technology made it affordable and effortless for the general population to create and share private photos and videos (Henry et al., 2021). Today, IBSA appears to affect a considerable minority of adolescents and emerging adults around the world (Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2020). For instance, in Norway – where the present study was conducted – a recent national prevalence survey found that 11.4% of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 years had experienced one or multiple forms of IBSA during their lifetime (Dale et al., 2023).

Responding to this development, the international research community has sought to map out the potential consequences of IBSA. Taken together, the current body of knowledge indicates that IBSA can have a wide range of detrimental effects on victims’ mental health. For instance, qualitative studies have found that victims describe IBSA as a catalyst for low self-esteem, loss of confidence, insecurity, shame, trust issues, paranoia, obsessive thoughts and behaviors, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Aborisade, 2022; Bates, 2017; J. K. Campbell et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2023; Huber, 2023; McGlynn et al., 2021; Mortensen, 2020). Echoing this, quantitative studies have found that experiences of being subjected to IBSA are significantly associated with multiple indicators of poor mental health (Frankel et al., 2018; Gassó et al., 2020, 2021; Pampati et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020).

By illustrating the many and serious consequences of IBSA, the above research has been indispensable to its growing recognition as a form of sexual violence that requires legislative, educational, and therapeutic responses. That being said, the knowledge produced by it has some important limitations. In particular, we have noted that previous studies have dedicated little effort to illuminating nuances in the experiences and outcomes described by victims, thereby limiting insight into how and why these may vary. Taking a critical realist stance (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979), we argue that it is crucial to understand underlying mechanisms of harm in IBSA in order to effectively address its negative outcomes. Within critical realism, the term “mechanism” refers to any physical, psychological, or social property, structure, or condition that has causal powers on experiential events and phenomena (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979). While it is assumed that mechanisms are largely unobservable, critical realists seek to understand them by exploring observable tendencies, including their apparent contingencies (Fletcher, 2017; Gerrits & Verweij, 2013). In line with this, the present study explored contrasts and complexities in victims’ experiences of harm.

To aid our investigation, we drew on the concept of *appraisal* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which refers to the evaluative process through which the individual ascribes meaning to a particular situation (i.e., a potential stressor). According to Lazarus and Folkman, there are three types of appraisals. Primary appraisal, which was the main focus of this study, refers to the individual’s interpretation of the personal significance of a particular situation. If the individual infers that nothing is at stake, it is presumed that the situation will be deemed irrelevant, benign, or positive and not engender stress. Conversely, if the individual infers that something is at stake, experiences of stress are expected to reflect their interpretation of the nature and level of harm, loss, challenge, or threat posed by the situation. In turn, the relationship between appraisal and stress is thought to be moderated by the individual’s evaluation of the accessibility and efficacy of possible coping strategies (i.e., secondary appraisal) as well as events or information that causes them to reappraise the situation.

In accordance with the basic tenets of critical realism (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979), appraisal theory suggests that the meaning an individual ascribes to a potential stressor is influenced by a wide range of interacting mechanisms. On a situational level, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that appraisal is shaped by a set of event characteristics, including the perceived novelty, event uncertainty, and temporal characteristics (e.g., imminence, duration, and temporal uncertainty) of the potential stressor. Importantly, they also suggested that lacking information about these aspects of a situation may itself become a source of stress. Schild and Dalenberg (2016) refer to this phenomenon as information deprivation trauma and suggest that it causes distress by obscuring information necessary for appraisal and coping. Along the same lines, it has been proposed that perceived uncontrollability is a defining characteristic of traumatic experiences (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000).

On a personal level, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that the individual’s evaluation of a certain situation is shaped

by their subjective commitments (e.g., personal values, goals, needs) and beliefs (e.g., assumptions about the nature of the world). Whereas the former is presumed to determine the individual’s sensitivity and vulnerability to a potential stressor, the latter is presumed to inform their interpretation of its implications. Relatedly, it has been proposed that psychological stress can be elicited through events that challenge or undermine personal beliefs, as this may cause the individual’s appraisal of a potential stressor to shift from benign to threatening (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Beyond this, it has been suggested that appraisal is influenced by the individual’s sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., Olff et al., 2007), developmental stage (e.g., Pynoos et al., 1999), and prior experiences of trauma (e.g., Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

Lastly, on a sociocultural level, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) recognized that the individual’s commitments and beliefs – and, hence, their appraisals – are inevitably influenced by the relationships, rules, structures, and institutions that make up their broader social context. Developing this idea further, Mesquita and Walker (2003) suggested that cultural models (i.e., socially shared values, beliefs, and practices) infuse potential stressors with particular meanings, thereby shaping the individual’s appraisal of their inherent salience and significance. In this regard, psychological conceptions of appraisal resonate with critical realist ideas of causation, which presume that experiential phenomena are shaped by the social, political, and historical context in which they occur (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979).

Importantly, in relation to IBSA, social mechanisms become particularly crucial to consider, as the violation itself does not necessarily involve any physical threats or harms. In recognition of this, scholars have begun to explore how the negative outcomes of IBSA may be shaped by cultural models of gender and sexuality. For instance, in their seminal work on IBSA, McGlynn and Rackley (2017) discussed how the nonconsensual distribution of private intimate images may inflict greater harm on women than men due to gendered double standards for sexual behavior. Supporting this, studies have found that girls and women who share intimate images of themselves are often held responsible if those images get disseminated and – in such instances – are judged more harshly than their male counterparts (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2013, 2022; Salter, 2016). Notably, despite Norway’s reputation as a sexually liberated society, with greater social acceptance for women’s sexuality (Lewin, 2008), similar tendencies have been reported in Norwegian news coverage of IBSA (e.g., Aasheim & Nordli, 2017; Røren, 2017).

That being said, we would argue that the impact of gender roles on victims’ personal experiences of IBSA remains uncertain. Indeed, as previous in-depth studies have either focused exclusively on female victims (e.g., Aborisade, 2022; Bates, 2017; Huber, 2023; Mandau, 2021; Mortensen, 2020), or have not elucidated differences in the outcomes described by women and men (e.g., J. K. Campbell et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2023; McGlynn et al., 2021), the current literature falls short in illuminating the role that gender plays in the lived consequences of IBSA. In response to this limitation, the present study purposefully drew on interviews with both male and female victims and investigated gendered patterns in their accounts of harm. However, by focusing more

broadly on the role of appraisal, our analysis welcomes the possibility that victims' experiences of IBSA may also be situated in and shaped by other situational, personal, and social structures and conditions.

In particular, we consider it pertinent to take into consideration the developmental stage and context of victims who participated in this study. In light of statistics indicating that rates of IBSA are highest among young people (Dale et al., 2023), the present study centered on the victimization experiences of adolescents and emerging adults. Taken together, these overlapping stages of life represent the transitional period from childhood to adulthood, in which the individual grapples with fundamental questions about their identity (Sawyer et al., 2018; Steinberg, 2005). Typically, this process involves seeking independence from one's parents and placing increasing emphasis on relationships with, and acceptance from, peers (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, due to limited rights and/or financial dependency, youth generally have little practical autonomy over their daily lives. In turn, the combination of young people's sensitivity to, and lack of control over, their social environment may have implications for how they evaluate the threats and harms involved in IBSA victimization.

Societal regulations of youth sexting may also serve as an important context for young victims' appraisals of IBSA. Whereas physical sexual activity in adolescence has long been considered normative in Norway (Træen, 1993; Træen & Kvalem, 1996), young people's involvement in sexual image sharing practices has sparked widespread alarm (Auen, 2019). In part, this discrepancy may reflect differences in the legal implications of young people's physical and digital sexual interactions: Whereas the age of consent for sex in Norway is 16 years, sexual images of individuals who are or appear to be under the age of 18 years are criminalized. However, as long as the recipient has consented to it, minors are not punished for sending nude photos or videos of themselves (Politiet, n.d.). Conversely, the act of sharing intimate images of others without their consent constitutes a criminal offense. Nevertheless, prevention messaging in Norwegian news media has often centered around discouraging young people from creating and sharing intimate images of themselves (Auen, 2019), thereby implying that victims' "irresponsible" behavior is (at least partly) to blame for the occurrence of IBSA (Karaian, 2014; McGovern & Lee, 2018).

Against this backdrop, we set out to explore young Norwegians' lived experiences of having intimate images disseminated against their will. More specifically, drawing on in-depth interviews with male and female victims, we asked: (1) what meanings do they attach to the experience of being subjected to IBSA, (2) how are these appraisals narratively linked to varying experiences of stress and harm, and (3) what do these patterns of meaning suggest regarding underlying mechanisms of harm in IBSA incidents.

## Method

### Participants

Prior to study recruitment, we defined the population of the study as individuals of any gender, between the ages of 16 and

26 years, who self-identified as victims of IBSA. Before we attempted to reach out to members of the target group, we obtained approval of the study from the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (ref. number 141795) and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (ref. number 924750). Afterward, we created a project website that included a brief presentation of the study, a link to the complete information sheet, and an encrypted contact form that website visitors could submit if they wanted to take part in the study. The website was communicated to potential target group members through posters and flyers distributed at secondary schools and youth health centers, posts on social media published by us and members of our professional network, as well as paid ads on Facebook and Instagram specifically targeting young people (ages 16–26) living in Norway. We did not advertise or offer any compensation for participation in the study.

Recruitment of participants started in September 2020 and lasted a year. The main reason that this process took so long to complete was that it proved challenging to come in contact with male victims of IBSA. Based on existing research on IBSA (McGlynn et al., 2021), we had anticipated that this problem might arise. Hence, from the beginning, we strived to compose gender inclusive texts for all recruitment materials and designed the accompanying images using colors typically associated with masculinity in western societies (i.e., blue, brown, and black; Taft, 1998). However, regardless of these efforts, very few boys and men submitted the contact form for the study. As such, all recruitment materials were eventually adjusted to exclusively target male victims. In addition to this, we published an op-ed in Norway's largest newspaper, *Verdens Gang*, in which we emphasized that we were interested in getting in touch with male victims of IBSA (Nygård & Kvalem, 2021).

In total, 36 contact forms were submitted. To screen potential participants and schedule interviews, we sent text messages to the phone numbers provided in the forms. Around half of the individuals we contacted ( $n = 17$ ) either did not respond to our message or decided not to take part in the study. Hence, the sample consisted of the five men and fifteen women who volunteered to take part in the study, all of whom met the inclusion criteria. Of these, ten were 16–19 years old, seven were 20–23 years old, and three were 24–26 years old at the time of the interview. The majority of participants were students attending either secondary school ( $n = 7$ ), folk high school ( $n = 2$ ), college or university ( $n = 8$ ). Of the remaining sample, one participant was working full time, one participant was enrolled in Norway's initial military service, and one participant was receiving disability benefits. Participants' pseudonyms are listed in Table 1, alongside information about their gender, age, and characteristics of their experience with IBSA, including the context in which the image was created and by whom it was disseminated. As the table shows, most participants ( $n = 13$ ) were minors at the time of their first experience with IBSA. None of the participants were older than 22 years at the time of the incident. Due to privacy considerations, we did not systematically record participants' sexual orientation, cultural identity, or religious beliefs.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants and their experiences of IBSA.

Participant	Gender	Age at interview	Age at incident	Creation of image by	Dissemination of image by
Ada	Girl/woman	16–19	<18	Someone else, without consent	Unknown
Alexander	Boy/man	16–19	≥18	Someone else, without consent	Friend <sup>a</sup>
Amanda	Girl/woman	24–26	<18	Self, voluntarily	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>b</sup>
Andrea	Girl/woman	20–23	≥18	Someone else, without consent	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>c</sup>
Aurelia	Girl/woman	20–23	<18	Self, voluntarily	Friend or acquaintance <sup>a</sup>
Aya	Girl/woman	20–23	≥18	Someone else, without consent	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>c</sup>
Emma	Girl/woman	16–19	<18	Self, pressured	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>b</sup>
Erik	Boy/man	20–23	<18	Self, voluntarily	Technological malfunction
Frida	Girl/woman	16–19	<18	Someone else, without consent	Acquaintance
Helle	Girl/woman	16–19	<18	Self, voluntarily	Acquaintance
Henrik	Boy/man	16–19	≥18	Self, voluntarily	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>b</sup>
Linnea	Girl/woman	16–19	<18	Self, pressured	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>d</sup>
Maria	Girl/woman	16–19	<18	Someone else, without consent	Friend
Oda	Girl/woman	24–26	≥18	Self, voluntarily	Unknown
Oliver	Boy/man	16–19	<18	Self, pressured	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>d</sup>
Olivia	Girl/woman	16–19	≥18	Self, voluntarily	Unknown
Rita	Girl/woman	20–23	<18	Self, voluntarily	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>d</sup>
Sofie	Girl/woman	20–23	<18	Someone else, with consent	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>d</sup>
Thomas	Boy/man	24–26	<18	Someone else, without consent	Friend
Zainab	Girl/woman	20–23	≥18	Someone else, without consent	Sexual/romantic partner <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Identity unknown.

<sup>b</sup>Ex-partner at the time of the incident.

<sup>c</sup>Current casual partner at the time of the incident.

<sup>d</sup>Current committed partner at the time of the incident.

## Procedure

All interviews were conducted by the first author between November 2020 and September 2021. Before scheduling interviews, individuals who had indicated that they wanted to take part in the study were contacted by phone. During the initial phone call, the information sheet was read aloud to them, and they were encouraged to ask questions about the study. Individuals who volunteered to take part in the study were then given the option of being interviewed in person or via Zoom (<https://zoom.us>). Those who selected the former option ( $n = 7$ ) were asked to choose a place for the interview, and all elected to be interviewed at the office of the first author. Those who selected the latter option ( $n = 13$ ) were told that they should select a location for the interview that felt safe and comfortable, and were given the option of having their video on or off.

The interviews were semi structured and guided by an interview schedule consisting of exploratory and open-ended questions (Appendix). The questions were developed in collaboration with a reference group consisting of youth activists and advisors from both governmental and non-governmental organizations whose work touches on IBSA and/or related issues. The interview guide was constructed to elicit detailed descriptions about how the IBSA incidents unfolded, how victimization was experienced and understood by participants at the time of the incidents, and how they at the time of the interview made sense of the incidents' long-term impact on their lives. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, the interviewer frequently reminded participants that they did not have to answer if they did not want to. The duration of the interviews ranged from 44 minutes to 2 hours and 14 minutes, and lasted on average 1 hour and 21 minutes.

All interviews were recorded with a smartphone app developed by the Services for Sensitive Data at the University of Oslo. Upon completion, interview recordings were transmitted in an encrypted format to TSD, a safe platform for collecting, storing and processing sensitive data. At the end of each

interview, the researcher also talked with participants about the legal status of IBSA and the services available to victims. Afterward, all participants were asked if they wanted to talk to a clinical psychologist, and three accepted the offer. Lastly, the researcher reiterated their rights, outlined the remainder of the research process, and encouraged participants to contact her if they had any questions about the study.

## Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim using f4transkript and imported into Microsoft Word, wherein the analysis was conducted. To protect the identity of the participants, their names were replaced by pseudonyms of their own choosing, and other personal identifiers were changed or omitted from the transcripts. When all transcripts had been completed, the first author contacted participants again to give them the opportunity to read through, correct, and/or retract their data. While several participants accepted the offer, no one requested any significant changes to be made.

To identify meaningful patterns in participants' accounts, our analysis followed the principles and procedures of *reflexive thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). In line with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) conception of appraisal as an interpretative process shaped by various personal, situational, and sociocultural mechanisms, we adopted an experiential and empathic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) that was broadly situated within a critical realist framework (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979). In doing so, we assumed that participants' accounts reflected their lived experiences and understandings, and thus would provide us with insight into their appraisals of the threats and harms involved in IBSA. At the same time, this analytical framework provided us with a rationale for looking beyond the surface level of the data, and utilizing the observed patterns of meaning to theorize around mechanisms at play in participants' experiences.

Coding was conducted by the first author. She began the process by reading each interview transcript carefully, composing a narrative summary of it, and noting down her initial interpretations of its content. Next, she reread the transcript and highlighted excerpts that she deemed relevant to the research question. Although the concept of appraisal was used to sharpen the focus of the analysis and identify demi-regularities (see Fletcher, 2017) within and across participants' accounts, this phase of the analysis remained largely inductive. Hence, when coding the highlighted text, the first author focused primarily on the semantic content of the data. When every interview transcript had been analyzed, she collated all of the codes in a separate document and examined them for patterns of meaning.

After constructing an initial set of themes, the first author imported interview extracts into the document to assess their validity. The structure, content, and name of the themes were then adjusted in dialogue with the second and third coauthors until all agreed that the themes were empirically grounded, theoretically meaningful, and represented a coherent and distinguishable "central organizing concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). In the results section, we focus on the experiential content of the themes. In other words, we place emphasis on participants' own descriptions of their experiences and understandings to explore the complexities, contexts, and contingencies of the meanings that they ascribed to IBSA. In the discussion section, the focus shifts to our broader theoretical interpretations of what these findings imply regarding mechanisms of harm in IBSA.

## Results

In searching for patterns of meaning across participants' accounts, we discovered that they tended to talk about IBSA as

a composite violation that consisted of several layers of victimization. Through our analysis, we came to understand each of these layers as a potential stressor that was encountered by most participants and yet carried different meanings to them. Drawing on this conceptualization, we developed an overarching theme for each layer of victimization, which we labeled as being (1) robbed of bodily autonomy, (2) stripped of privacy, (3) subjected to public scrutiny, and (4) trapped in a state of uncertainty. In addition to this, we devised multiple subthemes to delineate similarities and differences in participants' appraisals of the threats and harms involved in each violation (see Figure 1).

### Robbed of Bodily Autonomy

Across interviews, it was frequently emphasized that every individual should have the right to bodily autonomy. Accordingly, participants collectively conceived of the primary perpetrator's decision to share (and sometimes create or obtain) intimate images of them against their will, without their consent, and behind their back as an "overstep," "trampling," or "breach" of their personal boundaries that had effectively robbed them of control over their own bodies, e.g., "It should kind of be *my decision* who I share that with. It should be *my decision* who gets to see it. And I felt like that decision was sort of taken from me." (Maria, age 16–19). Echoing the interpersonal nature of this layer of victimization, we found that it had negative implications for participants' sense of trust and safety.

### Obliteration of Interpersonal Trust

I think I used to be more like *naïve* in a way. It was as if ... everything was just like nice and ... I don't know. I think I've changed a lot since then, especially in relation to uh ... trusting people and things like that. (Ada, age 16–19)

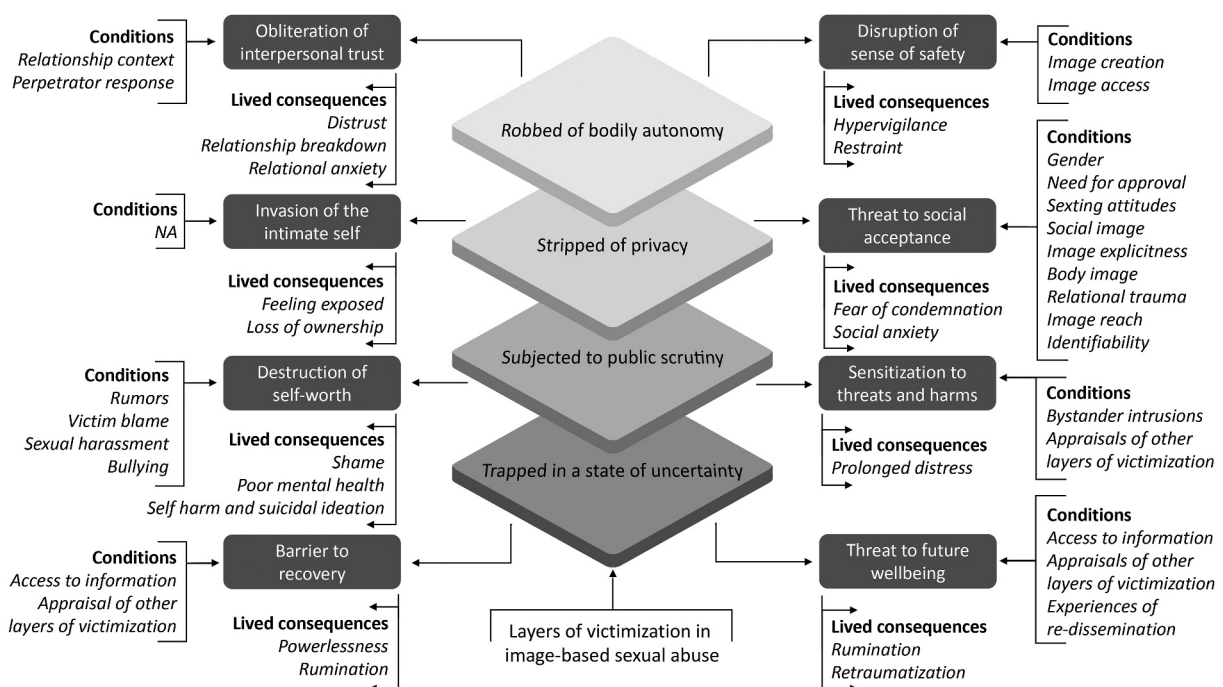


Figure 1. Thematic map.

Like Ada, most participants recounted that the IBSA incident had caused a transient or enduring decline in their ability to trust other people. However, upon closer consideration, we found that the object and extent of their distrust varied. For some, the resulting trust issues seemed to only pertain to the perpetrator(s), e.g., “It ruined the group for me, you could say. I didn’t feel as safe around them. Like, I didn’t trust them.” (Alexander, age 16–19). For others, the loss of trust appeared to have taken a more generalized form, e.g., “I guess I generally trust people less” (Ada, age 16–19). In our efforts to make sense of this variation, we found that it seemed to reflect differences in the relationship context that participants had been subjected to IBSA, as this appeared to have shaped the meanings that they attached to this layer of victimization.

On the one hand, participants who barely knew the perpetrator, or had no idea who the perpetrator was, emphasized the unexpected, random, and impersonal nature of the image dissemination, e.g., “I don’t know who this person was. He used . . . an Instagram account and a Snapchat account that had just been created then and there” (Olivia, age 16–19). Accordingly, this layer of victimization appeared to have disrupted their beliefs about the benevolence of people in general. For example, when reflecting on the experience of having her private intimate images published on an anonymous Internet forum, Oda (age 24–26) expressed, “I have a hard time trusting other people, because I’ve never truly known *who* was behind it. Like, it could have been anyone . . . so I’ve been slightly more *paranoid* in that sense.” In a similar vein, other participants who did not know the true identity of their perpetrator talked about becoming overall less “naïve” and more “skeptical” or “cynical” in relation to other people.

On the other hand, participants who had been subjected to IBSA by a romantic partner or friend tended to describe the perpetrator’s violation of their bodily autonomy as a “betrayal” or “breach of trust.” Accordingly, they indicated that this layer of victimization had shattered their assumptions about their relationship with this person. For instance, remembering the moment she realized that her boyfriend had shared intimate images of her with their mutual friends, Zainab (age 20–23) stated, “I remember kind of shivering a little, because I couldn’t quite make sense of the fact that the person I trusted the most, and had been with for two years, could do something like this.” Likewise, other participants who had experienced similar situations recounted feeling “hurt,” “deceived,” “confused,” or “angry” in response to the perpetrator’s violation of their bodily autonomy.

At the same time, we found that some participants were not particularly upset by it. Across interviews, these participants typically recounted that the perpetrator had been quick to apologize and do what they could to limit the dissemination. In turn, this appeared to have enabled participants to reappraise the situation as unproblematic. For instance, upon finding out that his friend had posted a nude photo of him on Instagram, Thomas (age 24–26) reached out to the person concerned and asked him to delete the photo. His friend immediately did, and stressed that he was sorry for sharing the image in the first place. Hence, even though Thomas identified his friend’s actions as a violation of his trust, he had been able to forgive him for and move on from the

incident: “He was a good friend of mine, and I’m still friends with him. It didn’t ruin anything in that sense.”

Thomas’s experience stands in stark contrast to that of many other participants, who recounted being met with denial, blame, minimization, or emotional manipulation when confronting their perpetrators, e.g., “He just, uh, he just like *denied* it” (Zainab, age 20–23). For these participants, the perpetrator’s blatant disregard of their feelings seemed to have forced them to reconsider the nature of their relationship with this person. For instance, when asked about the experience of knowing that someone in his friend group was responsible for the image dissemination, without anyone owning up to the violation, Alexander (age 16–19) stated that “It was like my illusion of being able to trust that group was gone.”

In addition to this, some participants indicated that the resulting distrust had been generalized to the type of relationship they had shared with the perpetrator. For instance, the majority of female participants who had been subjected to IBSA by a boyfriend or male sexual partner talked about growing “distrustful,” “suspicious” or “cautious” of men as a group, and disclosed that they had become anxious about engaging in romantic or sexual relationships for an extended period of time after the incident. While Henrik (age 16–19) was the only male participant who shared this experience, it appeared to have affected him in much the same way as it did female participants, as he talked about “staying away from” and “not being interested in talking to” girls ever since the incident happened.

### *Disruption of Sense of Safety*

I got sort of scared of drinking alcohol for a very long time after the incident, because I thought . . . “this can happen again” . . . and yeah, I ended up not daring to have intercourse with . . . anyone, for a really long time after it. (Aya, age 20–23)

In addition to harming their sense of trust, Aya and a handful of other participants talked about how the perpetrator’s violation of their bodily autonomy had caused them to feel less safe in situations that they had previously considered harmless. This outcome seemed to be tied to their shared experience of not only having intimate images disseminated without their consent, but also having these images created or obtained without their knowledge. When reflecting on this experience, participants conveyed that it had been deeply unnerving to realize how easily others could capture or acquire nude or sexual photos or videos of them behind their back. In turn, this realization appeared to have caused them to perceive IBSA as an ever-present threat, e.g., “And it got kind of *scary*. Like, you never know if someone is going to take a photo.” (Frida, age 16–19).

Consequently, we found that these participants had grown more alert to their surroundings. In particular, participants indicated that they had become hypervigilant of situations similar to the one in which the perpetrator had initially obtained the image. For instance, participants who had been photographed or filmed during a sexual encounter disclosed that they had become particularly wary of where their partners placed their phones during sex, e.g., “I always paid attention to where the phone ended up, if we were

about to have sex” (Aya, age 20–23). In turn, this newfound sense of threat seemed to have caused some participants to act with more caution and restraint in their daily lives – often at the expense of their own wellbeing. For example, when talking about her response to being photographed by her friend while she was sleeping over at her house, Maria (age 16–19) stated that “If I had sleepovers with my friends, I would always wear clothes, even though I normally wouldn’t because I’m not really able to sleep with clothes on.”

### Stripped of Privacy

In addition to bodily autonomy, participants stressed that everyone should have the prerogative to control how, when, and to whom their bodies are displayed. Consonant with this, they identified the involvement of onlookers as a serious “breach of privacy,” that had stripped them of authority over other people’s access to their naked bodies, e.g., “It is a form of digital abuse, in a way. I mean, uh, people have gotten a piece of you, or seen you in a setting that they have no right to see” (Amanda, age 24–26). Hence, we found that the mere *presence* of bystanders had given rise to another layer of victimization, which participants both characterized as an invasion of their intimate sphere and a threat to their social wellbeing.

### Invasion of the Intimate Self

It was sort of *all* of me, completely naked, in a *very* sexualized situation. It’s not something that just anyone gets to see, and I want to be in control of who gets to see it, naturally. (Andrea, age 20–23)

Like Andrea, participants typically expressed that being in a state of undress or engaged in a sexual activity was something deeply “personal,” “intimate,” and “vulnerable” that they only ever wanted to share with carefully selected individuals. Accordingly, all participants connected this layer of victimization to a disturbing sensation of having their innermost intimate selves forcibly exposed to, and invaded by, the outside world. More specifically, they described feeling deeply distressed at the thought of having their naked bodies and sexual experiences ogled by unwelcome spectators, e.g., “It’s simply not comfortable to be naked in front of someone you don’t want to be naked in front of” (Thomas, age 24–26). In turn, this invasion of their privacy had caused some participants to feel like public property and, consequently, to experience a loss of ownership over their own bodies, e.g., “I couldn’t own my own body, because my body has become the property of the entire town. Everybody has seen it, everybody knows” (Aya, age 20–23).

### Threat to Social Acceptance

I was afraid of getting comments [...] Something about me as a person, I think. Like “oh you’re so gross” or “you’re stupid” or things like *that*. About what I’m like as a *person* [...] It didn’t happen though, luckily. So that was good. But yeah . . . I was afraid of it for a while. (Rita, age 20–23)

Echoing Rita’s experience, the vast majority of participants recounted that they had been worried that they would be

perceived or treated differently by those who became witness to the image dissemination. Hence, they generally seemed to have appraised this layer of victimization as a threat to their social acceptance. In particular, participants recounted worrying that their parents would be disappointed in them, and that their peers would judge, harass, or reject them. Importantly, we found that the prospect of these reactions could engender considerable distress, regardless of how bystanders actually responded to the incident. For instance, many participants recounted that they had developed apprehensions about going to places where they could encounter someone who had seen or heard about the disseminated image (e.g., school), with some of them indicating that this very possibility had resulted in clinical levels of social anxiety, e.g., “I was very afraid. I got diagnosed with something called social anxiety? I was very afraid of people in general.” (Emma, age 16–19).

Compared to participants’ appraisals of the other threats and harms presented by the image dissemination, their fears of facing social condemnation appeared to be shaped by a particularly complex constellation of personal and situational conditions. On a fundamental level, participants’ sense of threat seemed to be borne out of the combination of their yearning for social approval (e.g., “I cared a lot about what people thought of me,” Emma, age 16–19), and their observation or internalization of negative attitudes toward the voluntary creation and exchange of intimate images – which was frequently referred to as “stupid,” “reckless,” “irresponsible,” and “gross.” Additionally, as several participants stated that their need to be respected and liked by their peers had been particularly strong around the time of the incident, their accounts indicated that this particular appraisal of threat might have been intensified by the developmental timing of the image dissemination, e.g.:

At that time it was sort of important to me to be cool and stuff like that, or like *popular* and hang out with the *right* people. So when it happened I guess I thought that it would maybe affect that to some extent. (Erik, age 20–23)

That being said, as the above tendencies also materialized in interviews with participants who had not been worried about the social costs of the image dissemination, we found that these conditions alone could not explain the extent to which participants had perceived this layer of victimization as a threat to their social acceptance. By comparing and contrasting the accounts of participants who had and had not feared social condemnation, we found that a number of other factors seemed to contribute to this particular appraisal. For instance, we found that differences in participants’ apprehensions partially reflected the extent to which the perceived connotations of the image dissemination conflicted or aligned with participants’ social image. This finding is illustrated in the following juxtaposition of statements by Ada and Thomas:

It wasn’t like what I used to act like at all [...] So I was like ‘shit, I don’t want anyone to have that perception of me. And so . . . Yeah, it was actually really uncomfortable, because then I felt like people saw me as kind of *uninhibited*. And that was *not* how I wanted to be seen. (Ada, age 16–19)



I was maybe a little bit like this party-loving . . . clown who always created good vibes [. . .] So the fact that there was this naked photo of me at a party going around was in a way . . . maybe a part of my *image*? (Thomas, age 24–26)

However, more notably, participants' sense of threat in this regard seemed to be shaped by gender, as we found several patterns of differences in the accounts of male and female participants. Firstly, in participants' descriptions of the potential connotations of the image dissemination, we found that their appraisals seemed to be shaped by gendered evaluations of how sexually explicit the disseminated images of them were. Whereas female participants typically did not distinguish between "sexual" and "nonsexual" nude images, male participants frequently did. More specifically, they tended to reason that nude images of men had to document sexual activity or arousal (e.g., an erection) to qualify as sexual. Accordingly, we found that male participants whose images were not sexually explicit typically expressed that they had felt somewhat protected by this, e.g., "If I had like . . . an erection in the photo then it would have been way, way worse than me just being naked at a party [. . .] So I think I came out of that situation pretty good" (Thomas, age 24–26).

Secondly, although the remaining male and female participants expressed worries about facing social condemnation, we found gendered patterns in the content of their concerns. On the one hand, female participants typically expressed fears of seeming "loose," "slutty," or "sexually deviant," and recounted worrying that people would think that they had sent intimate images of themselves to many people. On the other hand, male participants described feeling anxious about being considered "weird," "uncool," or "creepy." In part, these appraisals seemed to be linked to the belief that others could perceive them as sexual predators, with Henrik (age 16–19) noting that he had been afraid that people would think he had sent the photo unsolicited: "I was scared that maybe . . . they would think that I was the kind of person who sends photos like that without being asked to do so."

Thirdly, we found that male and female participants who disclosed that they had been afraid of being deemed unattractive by their peers expressed somewhat different concerns. On the one hand, female participants typically recounted worrying that their bodies looked "fat" or "big," that their buttocks or breasts did not look "nice," or that they had been photographed or filmed in an "ugly" angle, e.g., "I was thinking like 'What if I look fat? What if my ass doesn't look nice? What if my boobs don't look nice?' [. . .] That was like the *first* thing that I was thinking." (Maria, age 16–19). On the other hand, male participants typically reported that they had been concerned that onlookers would judge their muscle definition or the size of their penis, e.g., "I didn't want everyone to think that, uh, 'he doesn't have a sufficiently defined sixpack or uh . . . a large enough chest or big enough dick'" (Erik, age 20–23).

However, regardless of gender, we found that these particular concerns were primarily conveyed by participants who recounted being dissatisfied with or ashamed of their bodies prior to the IBSA incident. Importantly, these participants indicated not only that their negative body image had shaped their appraisals of the social implications of the image dissemination, but also that the incident had exacerbated their

preexisting body image issues, e.g., "My dysfunctional view of my body and treatment of my body, uh, really escalated after that incident" (Aya, age 20–23). Conversely, participants who reported that they had a positive body image at the time of the incident, or had been satisfied with the look of their body in the disseminated photo or video, rarely recounted having appearance-related concerns. In fact, some even pointed to their physical appearance in the image as a source of relief, e.g., "My first thought was that I looked good [. . .] That it was kind of okay, fine, like 'he looks good naked.' That was the first thought I had" (Thomas, age 24–26).

Furthermore, we found that participants' fears of facing social disapproval were intimately linked to prior experiences of being subjected to bullying, feeling rejected by friends, or struggling with social adjustment. More specifically, we found that participants who disclosed having experiences such as these often expressed or implied that their resulting insecurities had caused them to appraise the possibility of suffering social condemnation as greater and more detrimental. For instance, at the time of the IBSA incident, Amanda (age 24–26) was just starting to recover from a long-lived and intensive episode of bullying, through which she had lost several friends. Hence, when the image of her was disseminated, she became overwhelmed with fear of once again being harassed and ostracized by her peers:

I just felt that I couldn't bear it anymore. Like, I just can't *fuckin*g take any more of this. I can't do it anymore. How . . . much should you like be able to stand through? [. . .] And so I felt that it was like a new bomb dropping at the worst time *imaginable*.

Lastly, we found that the intensity and persistence of participants' fears were tied to their beliefs regarding the reach and identifiability of the disseminated images. On the one hand, participants who believed that the image had been widely circulated, or considered it likely that they would be recognized by those who saw it, typically conveyed that they felt more threatened by this layer of victimization, e.g., "I felt like 'Oh, if only I hadn't shown my face in it,' because then I could have like *denied* it" (Amanda, age 24–26). On the other hand, participants who believed that their identity remained unknown, or perceived the scope of the dissemination to be limited, appeared to have experienced some level of protection from these notions, e.g., "I thought 'Yeah, okay. Fine. It's not too bad. My name isn't on there. There is no way for them to *find* me and threaten me with it in the future'" (Linnea, age 16–19).

### **Subjected to Public Scrutiny**

Except for a few notable exceptions, participants usually recounted that they had endured at least one form of unwanted attention as a direct result of the image dissemination. Thus, participants' accounts demonstrated that the inherent involvement of bystanders not only comprised a violation of their privacy, but also created a situation in which their experiences of victimization became a topic of public scrutiny, e.g., "I noticed that people started to stare at me in the hallways, and I couldn't really understand why [. . .] And then they told that there were some rumors about me going around" (Emma, age

16–19). As such, we found that another layer of victimization was generated by bystanders' responses to the IBSA incident, which not only triggered painful memories but also – in some instances – involved additional violations.

### *Sensitization to Threats and Harms*

Like, *immediately* after it happened . . . like, for example, if I was at a party or something like that, and people had seen the photo, then they'd come up to me and talk about it. And it . . . it wasn't exactly *comfortable* that they just *suddenly* came over to talk to me about it [ . . . ] But most of them have been like 'that's fucked up' when I've told them what happened—the ones who've come up to me and asked me about it and things like that. Like the *vast majority* have been like "yeah that's fucked up" in a way. So it was *way, way worse* in my head than it actually ended up being. (Henrik, age 16–19)

Across interviews, we found that participants' experiences of this layer of victimization predominantly consisted of being informed or asked about the disseminated images. As described by Henrik, this form of attention was rarely perceived as ill-intentioned, but was rather attributed to the mere curiosity or even sympathy of those who witnessed the incident. Nevertheless, we found that many participants described the sensation of becoming the center of attention as deeply uncomfortable. In our efforts to make sense of this apparent contradiction, we found that questions and comments from bystanders had served as inescapable reminders of the IBSA incident, that reactivated any negative feelings linked to participants' experiences of victimization, e.g., "Every time I get a message about those images I get a stomachache. I get a lump in my stomach and I feel awful." (Oda, age 24–26).

Accordingly, the extent to which participants had been troubled by this kind of attention seemed to largely reflect the extent to which they had appraised the other layers of victimization as harmful or threatening. In particular, we found that the resulting distress appeared to be compounded by participants' fears of facing social condemnation. For instance, Ada (age 16–19) – who recounted being deeply worried about being seen as ugly, irresponsible, and uninhibited because of the image dissemination – stated that the inquisitiveness of her peers had been the most distressing aspect of the IBSA incident: "That was probably what I thought was the *worst* part of it – that people started *asking* if it was me." In contrast, Thomas (age 24–26) – who was relatively unbothered by this layer of victimization – conveyed that he had appraised the attention from bystanders as primarily positive: "I did kind of like that attention – that people were talking about me."

In addition to this, participants' experiences of this form of attention appeared to be shaped by the characteristics of their respective situations. Most importantly, we found that the extent of participants' distress seemed to reflect the frequency with which bystanders showed an interest in the IBSA incident. For instance, Helle (age 16–19) reported that the first couple of times she had been asked about a widely shared nude photo that had been falsely accredited to her, she had felt unaffected by it: "I just answered 'No, that's not me.' I didn't care that much back then because I knew that it wasn't of me." However, when the topic kept coming up in different settings, she eventually felt distraught: "You get sort of dejected and

a little bit sad, and just . . . I just don't understand *how* it can be that fun?." Conversely, participants who rarely encountered situations like these emphasized that the limited amount of attention from bystanders had been a source of relief, e.g., "It was a *very* good feeling to realize that people did not think about *that* when they met me and things like that" (Frida, age 16–19).

Thus, participants' accounts illustrated that repeated exposure to this form of attention had a sensitizing effect on their experiences of stress and harm. In the same vein, we found that participants equated the period of time in which they had remained apprehensive of the various implications of the image dissemination with the period of time in which bystanders showed an interest in it, with, e.g., "It got a lot better when people stopped like commenting on it and . . . then I slowly but surely stopped dreading going outside during recess or have gym class [ . . . ] I stopped dreading these things" (Rita, age 20–23). In other words, participants indicated that this form of attention had effectively prolonged their experiences of victimization. Importantly, this also meant that the resulting stress and harm could last for several years after the initial image dissemination, e.g., "It is upsetting that someone should find it *interesting* or *appealing* to talk about . . . like *four* years after it happened" (Helle, age 16–19).

### *Destruction of Self-Worth*

I've *heard* from people that there are still rumors going around about me today, and I try to get them to *understand* that it isn't *true* . . . but it's a little bit difficult to explain because I often get like . . . told that *I'm* lying because *everyone else* says it's true . . . and yeah, that's why I'm losing friends and a lot of stuff like that. (Emma, age 16–19)

On top of being informed or asked about the incident, Emma and a handful of other female participants disclosed that they had suffered rumors, victim blame, bullying, sexual harassment, and social exclusion at the hands of those who knew about the image dissemination. In addition to strangers, acquaintances, friends, and family members, we found that participants had encountered responses like these from professionals who are supposed to offer help and support to victims of abuse, including police officers and health care providers, e.g., "I remember my psychologist – I talked to her too [ . . . ] She was very nice, but I remember she said 'Yeah, so have you learned that you have to consider more carefully who you have sex with?'" (Aya, age 20–23). Importantly, we found no variation in participants' appraisals of bystander responses like these, as all of them implied or expressed that it had significantly challenged or damaged their feelings of self-worth, e.g.:

It was when these photos were disseminated, and I saw how people talked about me, uh, that I got these feelings. Before, I remember I was very like – I knew how people talked about me, but like I couldn't have cared less about it then. But when people portrayed me like that, which is the complete opposite of who I am as a person, and my values and attitudes . . . then, I remember it really affected me. I felt very ashamed. I felt very small. I felt very like worthless. (Oda, age 24–26)

Compared to all other layers of victimization, we found that experiences such as these carried especially detrimental implications for participants' mental health. Most notably,

participants recounted that their experiences of being judged, stigmatized, dehumanized, rejected, objectified, and sexualized had triggered feelings of shame, loneliness, reduced self-esteem, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts or behaviors, e.g., “I almost felt like I actually wanted to die. I got a little suicidal, I can admit that.” (Oda, age 24–26). Moreover, we found that participants attributed their suicidal ideation directly to their need to escape negative attention from their social environment, as articulated by Aya (age 20–23) in her account of committing serious self-harm after being repeatedly mocked and shamed by the people around her:

Um, and I’m like planning to take my own life when I get home, in order to not . . . to not have to, uh, *deal with* these [reactions]. Because my hometown is so small, and everybody knows everybody. The people who got up in my face at the party were people from the local gym, younger people, older people, people who are my age, people who work at the local grocery store. And it escalates and escalates . . . until I’m in front of the mirror and just looking at myself, unable to see anything below like, my *neck*, I recall . . . and that’s all I’m able to see, while I pull out the sharpest thing I can find—which was a needle or something, I can’t remember. And then I slice it *multiple* times across my skin until blood is spilling everywhere.

Importantly, similar to seemingly benign responses from bystanders, participants’ narratives demonstrated that these forms of attention could persist for a long time after the initial image dissemination, thereby extending and exacerbating their overall experiences of victimization. A particularly alarming example of this was provided by Emma (age 16–19), who had been subjected to IBSA in lower secondary school. In addition to the social repercussions she had experienced at the time – which involved losing friends, being shunned by her classmates, and becoming the subject of numerous rumors – she disclosed that she was still being pressured for nude images and frequently received offensive messages via social media, even though several years had passed since the initial image dissemination:

Emma: I still get daily messages from some of them, and they still badger me about it.

Interviewer: In what ways? What do they write in the messages?

Emma: Let me see if I can find some of them. I wrote them down you see . . . Yeah, so they write things like “Can I get some nude photos too?” and “Is it true that you sent nudes to a lot of footballers” and, yeah. Also, someone commented on a photo I had on Instagram, like . . . “do you send nudes?” I think it said.

Interviewer: How often do you get messages like these?

Emma: Maybe at least once a week? And then I get other like small messages every day, or something like that.

### **Trapped in a State of Uncertainty**

When asked about the practical details regarding their own victimization, participants often replied that they had not had access to all the relevant information, such as what the image contained, who had disseminated it, and how many people it reached. Thus, participants’ narratives demonstrated that the disembodied, indirect, and obscured nature of IBSA

perpetration had made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to gain clarity around the nature, scope, and duration of the image dissemination: “There’s this uncertainty, and then there’s no way to figure it out either.” (Aurelia, age 20–23). Across interviews, we found that this lack of insight not only represented a barrier to participants’ recovery from the situation, but also engendered a sense of being under perpetual threat of revictimization.

### **Barrier to Recovery**

I mean, I think I had this stressed-out paranoid feeling for maybe . . . maybe like a few *months*? Like a couple of months [. . .] It is kind of a *lot* to be feeling over a longer period of time. It really is. And it’s especially uncomfortable to feel like you can’t trust anyone. Because, yeah, as I said, I don’t really know how it all played out. (Aurelia, age 20–23)

Like Aurelia, many participants expressed that they had become preoccupied with the unknown aspects of the image dissemination. In addition to prompting them to spend a considerable amount of time and energy on stress-inducing rumination, participants conveyed that their lack of insight had made it difficult for them to navigate and cope with the situation, e.g., “I kind of want to know, but I don’t know how I should react to it anyway. And it’s really difficult or *impossible* to figure it out” (Emma, age 16–19). At the same time, we found that participants were generally not distressed by every missing piece of information, and that some participants appeared to be overall unbothered by this aspect of the situation.

In our efforts to make sense of these divergences, we found that participants’ experiences of being in the dark about certain aspects of the image dissemination seemed to be largely contingent on their appraisals of the harms, losses, and threats presented by the related layers of victimization. For instance, participants who recounted being afraid of facing negative social reactions typically expressed feeling distressed by their lack of knowledge about the scope of the dissemination, e.g., “I was terrified that people had seen that video. Like, I was thinking ‘Shit. What if my sister has seen it? Or mom? Or dad?’ I mean, I didn’t know how it spread.” (Ada, age 16–19). Conversely, participants who did not perceive the IBSA incident as a threat to their social acceptance placed little emphasis on their lack of insight in this regard. For instance, although Alexander (age 16–19) had no way of knowing how many people had seen the disseminated video of him, he made no indications of feeling distraught on account of this. However, knowing that someone in his friend group was behind the image dissemination, he had felt deeply bothered by the fact that none of his friends had owned up to betraying his trust:

I just wanted to give that person a chance to make things right. Because when you set things right then you can put it behind you. But now I know that there is someone who didn’t give a *damn* about my boundaries . . . and all that. And who doesn’t even dare to own up to it.

### **Threat to Future Wellbeing**

I’m like constantly – I mean, I have *tried* not to think about it . . . but . . . there’s *nothing* that’s stopping this person from doing it

again, because they still have the photos . . . so, yeah, I don't know. It might be a month, and it *might* happen again . . . and also it might never happen. But since the situation sort of isn't . . . it is over but it isn't over for me? (Olivia, age 16–19)

As articulated by Olivia, we found that the uncertainties surrounding the IBSA incident had prompted some participants to spend a considerable amount of time and energy on worrying about whether the disseminated image of them would resurface at a later point in life. In other words, these participants appeared to have appraised this layer of victimization as a lurking threat to their wellbeing. Importantly, we also found that this particular sense of threat could have important implications for participants' outlooks on life. For instance, Zainab (age 20–23) mentioned that her fear of experiencing re-dissemination had prompted her to seriously consider whether she should give up on her career aspirations:

What I am most afraid of is like if I . . . get a really good job or something like that, uh, if it in any way was to suddenly reappear, then it would be a huge . . . crisis for me [...] Will it affect my career in any way? Should I like *aim* for jobs that have *nothing* to do with . . . civic society *because of* or in fear of that something like that could happen? And I *hate* that this gets to dominate like . . . how I think about my career and future. That insecurity.

In addition to this, participants' accounts demonstrated that the threat of revictimization was undeniably real, as several of them recounted experiencing one or multiple rounds of re-dissemination. For instance, Oda (age 24–26) recounted that the photos of her had resurfaced sporadically for many years after the initial IBSA incident: "It was very like 'up and down.' Even a whole year could go by, and then I would think 'Now everyone has forgotten' and then suddenly the images were disseminated again." Hence, we found that the uncertainties surrounding the image dissemination meant that it was, in practice, impossible for participants to truly escape or put an end to their experiences of victimization.

## Discussion

The present study sought to shed light on young Norwegians' lived experiences of having intimate images disseminated against their will. In line with previous studies (e.g., Bates, 2017; J. K. Campbell et al., 2022; Huber, 2023), we found that IBSA victimization can have a wide range of negative mental health implications, including reduced sense of trust and safety, helplessness, shame, impaired self-esteem and self-worth, loneliness, self-harm, symptoms of anxiety and depression, and suicidal ideation. However, our analysis also expands the current body of knowledge by elucidating nuances in victims' experiences of distress. In the following, we utilize insights gleaned from this endeavor to theorize around the underlying mechanisms of harm in IBSA incidents.

In their initial theoretical delineation of IBSA, McGlynn and Rackley (2017) conceptualized intimate image dissemination as a multifaceted form of abuse that violates victims' fundamental rights to integrity, privacy, dignity, and autonomy. In a similar vein, we found that participants in this study talked about their experiences of IBSA as comprising several "layers of victimization." More specifically, participants collectively conveyed that they had been robbed of bodily autonomy,

stripped of privacy, subjected to public scrutiny, and trapped in a state of uncertainty. While each layer of victimization appeared to impact participants' mental health in distinctive ways, our findings also demonstrated that these ramifications were unequally realized across different instances of IBSA. Hence, drawing on appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we came to understand the layers of victimization as potential stressors that can carry different meanings to different victims. Before we delve further into this variation, including what it may suggest regarding underlying mechanisms of harm in IBSA incidents, we want to draw attention to their shared foundation.

Across the various layers of victimization, we found that participants had suffered a comprehensive loss of control that extended far beyond their loss of authority over the disseminated images. More specifically, participants described losing control over how their bodies and sexualities were used, who had access to these aspects of their lives, and how they were presented to the outside world. On top of this, participants emphasized how the unknowable nature of the image dissemination – as well as its unpredictable social implications – made it difficult (if not impossible) for them to navigate, escape, or put an end to the situation. While similar findings have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Bates, 2017; McGlynn et al., 2021; Mortensen, 2020), the loss of control involved in IBSA incidents has typically been presented as a consequence alongside other negative outcomes for victims' mental health. In contrast to this, we propose that loss of control is a fundamental mechanism that lies at the crux of the harms and threats involved in IBSA victimization.

The above reasoning resonates with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) suggestion that the outcome of appraisal is partially influenced by the extent to which the individual believes they are able to control, predict, or cope with a given situation. It is also supported by research indicating that having a high perception of control promotes adaptation and offers protection in the face of adversity (Chipperfield et al., 2017), as well as theoretical conceptualizations of trauma that identify perceived uncontrollability as a defining element of such experiences (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000). However, while our findings seem to suggest that loss of control may be a central mechanism of harm in IBSA incidents, they also demonstrate that this alone cannot explain the negative consequences suffered by victims.

By exploring the meanings that participants attached to the various layers of victimization, we found that they had appraised the image dissemination as detrimental to their sense of trust, safety, privacy, and/or social acceptance. Also, we found that many participants evaluated the potential permanency of the disseminated images as a lurking threat to their wellbeing. Findings like these are frequently reported in the existing body of research (Aborisade, 2022; Bates, 2017; J. K. Campbell et al., 2022; Huber, 2023; Mandau, 2021), indicating that victims' appraisals of IBSA incidents may traverse cases, age groups, genders, and geographic locations. At the same time, our analysis demonstrates that experiences of IBSA victimization are not universally shared but vary according to complex constellations of situational, personal, and sociocultural structures and conditions.

By way of illustration, let us further consider an appraisal that appeared to play a particularly crucial role in experiences of harm: victims' evaluation of IBSA as a threat to their social acceptance. In an effort to elucidate the contexts and contingencies of this appraisal, our analysis delineates how participants' fears of being judged, harassed, or ostracized by those who witnessed the image dissemination were tied to the (perceived) scope of the image dissemination as well as their need for acceptance, desired social image, body (dis)satisfaction, and prior experiences of peer rejection or victimization. In keeping with a critical realist understanding of causation (Fletcher, 2017), we regard these findings as demi-regularities that hold clues about underlying mechanisms of harm in IBSA incidents.

For instance, focusing on situational and personal levels of explanations, these tendencies may be seen as indications that victims' appraisals of IBSA as a threat to their social lives emerge from interactions between particular event characteristics (e.g., perceived controllability; Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000), psychological pre-conditions (e.g., body image and sensitization to stress; Fang & Hofmann, 2010; Stroud, 2020), and fundamental human drives (e.g., the need to belong; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, in order to understand why these mechanisms are activated by and shape experiences of IBSA victimization, it is necessary to take into consideration the broader social context of victims. In particular, we propose that participants' fears of facing social condemnation may reflect the Western idealization of thin and muscular bodies (Grogan, 2021), the dominant framing of youth sexting as naïve and reckless (Auen, 2019; Karaian, 2014; McGovern & Lee, 2018), and pervasive double standards for men and women's sexuality (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

Importantly, even though Norway is widely recognized as an egalitarian society – in which gender differences in sexual values, norms, and behaviors are fairly small (Lewin, 2008) – studies from the last decade have demonstrated that sexual double standards continue to influence Norwegian youth culture (Fjær et al., 2015; Togle et al., 2023). By delineating differences in how male and female participants conceived of the social threats involved in IBSA victimization, our analysis illustrates how these double standards may be reproduced in the context of intimate image dissemination. For instance, we found that male participants less readily perceived the disseminated images of themselves as “sexual” and gained a sense of protection against negative social repercussions from this notion. A similar finding was reported by Salter (2016), who pointed out that whereas nude images of boys and men can be affixed with a wide range of meanings (e.g., humor), nude images of girls and women hold “an inherently sexual and pornographic quality” (p. 2728).

At the same time, our findings show how sexual double standards do not entirely shield male victims from worries about the social implications of having intimate images disseminated. Indeed, although we found that male participants did not share female participants' fears of seeming “loose” or “slutty,” several of them expressed worries about being wrongly perceived as someone who sends unsolicited “dick pics.” These gendered worries mirror dominant narratives of sexual image sharing practices, in which nude images of girls

and women are framed as serious threats to their reputation (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016), while nude images of boys and men are framed as instruments of sexual harassment (Waling & Pym, 2019). In other words, our findings suggest that while sexual double standards may constitute an important mechanism of harm in IBSA incidents, these norms seem to operate somewhat differently in the context of digital sexual interactions, in that they may also carry negative implications for boys and men.

Moreover, our findings indicate that the harms of IBSA are not only socially situated through victims' appraisals of the dangers involved in the initial image dissemination, but also socially sustained and escalated through the responses of those who become witness to their victimization. As has been reported in previous studies on IBSA and sexting among youth both within (e.g., Mandau, 2021; Mortensen, 2020) and outside (e.g., Ringrose et al., 2013, 2022) of Scandinavia, we found that some participants had suffered victim blame, bullying, sexual harassment, and/or social ostracism from bystanders in the aftermath of the IBSA incident. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that young victims of IBSA are at risk of suffering secondary victimization (Williams, 1984), which is known to have a considerable negative impact on mental health (R. Campbell, 2008). Likewise, we found that experiences of this form of attention were tied to the more serious consequences of IBSA victimization, including isolation, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.

In addition to this, our findings demonstrate that even seemingly benign looks, questions, and comments from bystanders can exacerbate the harms of IBSA, by serving as inescapable reminders of the image dissemination that triggered the distress caused by the other layers of victimization. In contrast to experiences of secondary victimization, we found that these forms of unwanted attention were encountered by most participants. Hence, although bystander responses to IBSA have received little attention in the literature (except for a few notable exceptions, e.g., Harder, 2021), our findings indicate that they constitute a considerable mechanism of harm in victims' experiences. Accordingly, we propose that IBSA may be best understood and approached as a form of collective abuse.

Lastly, the present study underscores that the social harms of IBSA are embedded in the developmental context of victims. Echoing research on adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), some participants contended that their age at the time of the incident had likely amplified their worries around how their peers would react to the image dissemination. In addition to this, our findings illuminate how societal regulations of young people's lives may influence their experiences of IBSA victimization. Most importantly, we found that participants' recollections of suffering unwanted and hurtful attention typically involved incidents that took place in school. In Norway, school attendance is obligatory in lower secondary education, and school absence may prevent students from passing classes in upper secondary education. As such, it may be exceedingly difficult for young victims of IBSA to avoid situations that engender stress. Also, consonant with Mandau's (2021) study of IBSA victimization among Danish girls, we found that

participants typically had been worried that their parents would be disappointed in them if they found out about the image dissemination. Taken together, these findings suggest that young victims may be unwilling to seek help from parents in the aftermath of IBSA incidents, which in turn may limit their access to strategies for coping with experiences of secondary victimization (e.g., transferring schools).

### **Implications for Practice**

The present study demonstrates that the negative consequences of IBSA are complex and cumulative, and cannot be attributed to the perpetration of the image dissemination alone. Hence, our findings indicate that potential victims may benefit from interventions that aim to do more than reduce the occurrence of IBSA, by also targeting other mechanisms of harm. Most importantly, as the responses of bystanders seem to play a particularly crucial role in young people's experiences of victimization, it may be constructive for future interventions to focus on the behaviors of those who become witnesses to IBSA incidents. Research from neighboring fields, including bullying and sexual harassment, indicates that bystander programs can be effective in promoting responses that are supportive of victims (Kettrey & Marx, 2019; Polanin et al., 2012). However, in order to implement these approaches in the context of IBSA, more research on bystander responses to this transgression is needed.

Furthermore, our findings support recommendations against the use of interventions that aim to dissuade youth from engaging in consensual sexual image sharing practices (e.g., Döring, 2014; Hasinoff, 2015). Not only does the present study demonstrate that IBSA incidents can occur regardless of victims' conscious involvement in the creation of the disseminated images, but it also indicates that their distress partly reflects the widespread moral panic surrounding adolescents' involvement in sexting. Hence, even if abstinence approaches were effective in reducing young people's engagement in sexting (which is unlikely, see Kirby, 2008), they would only prevent a fraction of IBSA incidents and could potentially foster harmful attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, rather than condemning young people's voluntary participation in sexting, we concur with Hasinoff's (2015) suggestion that efforts to prevent intimate image dissemination should focus on the perpetrator's transgression and encourage reflection around sexual ethics, consent, and respect.

Finally, as victims' distress seems to partly emerge from the mere expectation of being judged or mistreated by those who witness the image dissemination, our findings underscore the importance of dismantling societal ideals, norms, and discourses that construct IBSA as a threat to victims' social lives. Hence, a more holistic approach to preventing the harms of IBSA may involve school-based comprehensive sexuality education (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021) and body image interventions (Kusina & Exline, 2019). In addition to this, professionals who encounter IBSA incidents through their work may help shift cultural models that fuel the harms of intimate image dissemination. For instance, drawing inspiration from a feminist narrative approach, DiTullio and Sullivan (2019)

recommended clinicians who work with victims of IBSA use inclusive and validating terminology, identify and deconstruct harmful societal beliefs, and empower victims to recognize themselves as agents capable of resisting and reauthoring dominant discourses of IBSA.

### **Methodological Reflections**

This study had some limitations that the reader should take into consideration when evaluating the reported findings. Most importantly, although the present study had a higher proportion of male participants compared to other qualitative studies on IBSA victimization (e.g., J. K. Campbell et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2023; McGlynn et al., 2021), it must be acknowledged that our analysis was based on interviews with a disproportionate number of male and female victims. Hence, we urge readers to be cautious when interpreting our findings regarding gender differences in the consequences of IBSA victimization. In particular, we advise against taking the finding that only female victims had suffered secondary victimization as evidence that male victims do not experience negative social reactions. Indeed, previous studies have demonstrated that male victims may also experience bullying or social ostracism in the aftermath of IBSA incidents (e.g., Berndtsson, 2022).

In addition to this, it should be acknowledged that the sample was limited in size and, more importantly, diversity. Although we did not systematically record participants' sexual orientations, cultural identities, or religious beliefs, the majority of the sample appeared to be ethnically Norwegian, and only a few participants mentioned non-heterosexual relationships or religious affiliations during interviews. Also, while our recruitment strategy was gender inclusive, we did not come in contact with any victims who identified themselves as non-binary or genderqueer. Given this apparent homogeneity, our findings may have limited generalizability to other or more diverse populations – including gender, sexual, and cultural minorities – in Norway and abroad. Furthermore, our analysis did not take into consideration how other sociodemographic characteristics besides gender may have shaped participants' experiences of IBSA victimization. As such, the present study may have overlooked mechanisms that contribute to the harmful outcomes of intimate image dissemination.

### **Conclusions**

Drawing on appraisal theory, the present study illustrates how the negative mental health implications of IBSA accumulate through several layers of victimization, which victims may or may not perceive as harmful or threatening to their wellbeing. Furthermore, adopting a critical realist understanding of causation, our analysis sheds light on how these appraisals may be shaped by complex constellations of situational, psychological, and social structures and conditions. In particular, we explored how the loss of control inherent to the image dissemination intersects with victims' need for social acceptance and broader cultural conceptions of beauty, sexuality, and gender. Importantly, as some of these mechanisms of harm are socially constructed and maintained, they are also amenable to change. In particular, our findings indicate that the negative

consequences suffered by young victims of IBSA may be reduced by dismantling the moral panic surrounding adolescent sexting, fostering critical reflection around sexual double standards, and developing interventions that teach young people how to respond if they become witness to instances of intimate image dissemination.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

#### Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Abuse Victimization

*Note: The following text has been translated from Norwegian to English using Chat GPT 3.5.*

#### First Contact with Potential Participants

When receiving a contact form submission, send a text message to the provided phone number. Introduce yourself and explain that you are contacting them in connection with an interview study about experiencing the spread of images or videos where one is partially or fully naked. Ask the person to confirm that they are the one who filled out the form. Then, schedule a phone call to talk about what it means to participate in the study.

Start the phone call by thanking the person for submitting the questionnaire. Then, read through the information sheet and allow the person to ask questions about the study. Provide them with information on where they can find and download the information sheet online.

If they wish to participate, schedule a time and place for the interview. Ask the person to think of a pseudonym they would like to use in the study.

#### Before Starting the Interview

Begin by introducing yourself and the research project. Explain that the interview will be recorded, but the audio recording will be encrypted and only accessible to the research group, who is committed to ensuring the participant's confidentiality. Explain that the interview will be de-identified as the recording is transcribed into text, and that it will not be possible to identify the participant in publications based on the study.

Also, explain the limits of confidentiality and provide examples of the type of information that may trigger obligation to report or duty to avert.

Next, explain that participation is voluntary and that the participant can choose whether to answer the questions asked. Emphasize that they can request a break or withdraw from the interview at any time. Explain that they can also withdraw after the interview has been conducted. Then, give the participant time to review the information sheet and ask questions about the project.

After all questions have been answered, or if the participant has no further questions, ask the participant if they have chosen a pseudonym they would like to use in the study. If they haven't already chosen one, assist them in selecting a pseudonym by suggesting different names. Then, write down the pseudonym in a notepad, and explain to the participant that if they want to access or withdraw the interview transcript, they will need to provide the chosen pseudonym.

Explain to the participant that they will be asked to give verbal consent to participate in the project without disclosing their name, and that this part of the audio recording will be stored separately from the interview recording and transcript. Start the audio recording, provide the participant with the pseudonym, and ask if they consent to participate in the interview. To give consent, have the participant read aloud the consent statement in the information sheet. Then, provide your own name and role in the project, and confirm that you have provided both written and verbal information about the study to the participant.

#### During the Interview

Listen actively and provide affirmative non-verbal responses to what the participant is telling you. For each event the participant describes, ask them to elaborate if the descriptions are brief or superficial, and ask relevant follow-up questions, such as:

- “What did you do when. . .?”
- “What were you thinking/how did you interpret. . .?”
- “How did you feel when. . .?”
- “What did he/she/they say or do when. . .?”
- “Where/when did this happen. . .?”

#### After the Interview

Thank the participant for taking part in the study and summarize/underline the importance of their personal contribution. Repeat the information about how and when the interview recording will be transcribed into text and how the participant can reach out to you if they have any questions, want access to the transcript, or wish to withdraw. Reiterate the commitment to confidentiality and the de-identification of the interview.

Ask the participant how they experienced the interview and provide (both verbally and in writing) information about services they can seek if they need help related to or want to discuss the incident further. Ask the participant if they want to talk to the clinical psychologist working on the project.

### Interview Questions

#### Intro

- Thank the participant for attending and introduce yourself
- Ask if the participant feels ready to be interviewed
- Explain the interview format
  - Aim is to understand their *experience* - they are the expert
  - Will ask some questions but mostly listen silently
  - May ask questions about things that may seem obvious – to understand their thought process
  - They are not obligated to answer any questions they don't want to
  - Interviews like this often last an hour or more, but if they want to end the interview earlier, that is fine. They can also ask for breaks during the interview
- Ask if the participant has re-read the information sheet
- Address key points in the information sheet
  - Audio recording will be taken
  - Confidentiality – de-identification – anonymization
    - Pseudonym
  - Limits to confidentiality – duty to report and prevent harm
  - Right to access, correction, and deletion
- Ask if the participant would like to re-read the information sheet
- Start the audio recording
  - Introduce yourself, the project, and state the date of the interview and the pseudonym of the participant
  - Participant's statement of consent:
    - I have received and understood the information about the research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I consent to participate in an interview about the non-consensual sharing of sexual images and videos, to have the interview recorded, and for my information to be used as described in the information sheet.

#### Timing of the Incident

- Let's start by talking about where you were in your life the first time you experienced someone sharing a sexual image or video of you without your consent. Can you tell me. . .
  - How long ago it happened?
  - What your life situation was at that time?
  - How you would describe yourself as a person at that time, before the image sharing?
  - How long the situation lasted? Is it still ongoing?
  - Have you experienced it multiple times?

### **Description of the Image/Video**

- I am curious to know if you can tell me about the image/video that was shared, so that I understand what happened. Can you tell me about. . . :
  - What the image/video showed?
  - Where the image/video was taken?
  - Who took the image/video?
  - Whether you consented to/knew about the image/video being taken?

### **Sequence of Events**

- Can you explain to me how the sharing unfolded, considering. . . :
  - The relationship you have/had with the person(s) who shared the image/video?
  - How the person(s) obtained the image/video?
  - How the image/video was shared?
  - How many people the image/video reached?

### **Own and Others' Reactions**

- Can you tell me a bit about how you experienced the sharing, including. . . :
  - How you found out that the image/video was being shared
  - How you felt when you found out
- Can you tell me what you did when you found out, for example. . . :
  - Whether you confronted the person behind the sharing, and if so, how that played out?

- Whether you reported the person behind the sharing to the authorities, and if so, how that played out?
- Whether you tried to stop the sharing, and if so, how that played out?
- Whether you told friends/parents/teachers or if they found out in other ways, and if so, how they reacted?
- Whether you sought help, and if so, how that played out?

### **Consequences**

- When you look back on the incident now, in what ways do you feel it has affected. . . :
  - Your everyday life or life in general (e.g., school, social media)?
  - Your relationship with yourself?
  - Your relationship with other people?

### **Reflections and Closing**

- Besides avoiding being subjected to the sharing, is there anything you wish had been done differently (regarding the sharing)? If so, what and how do you think it would have helped you?
- Finally, is there anything I haven't asked about that you would like to tell me related to the incident or your life in general?
  - Is there anything you would like to elaborate on or change in your answers?