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An Exploratory Perception Analysis of Consensual and Nonconsensual Image Sharing

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Keywords; nonconsensual pornography, revenge porn, sexting, perception analysis, online intimate image sharing

Abstract:

Limited research has considered individual perceptions of moral distinctions between consensual and nonconsensual intimate image sharing, as well as decision making parameters around why others might engage in such behavior. The current study conducted a perception analysis using mixed-methods online surveys administered to 63 participants, inquiring into their perceptions of why individuals engage in certain behaviors surrounding the sending of intimate images from friends and partners. The study found that respondents favored the concepts of (1) sharing images with romantic partners over peers; (2) sharing non-intimate images over intimate images; and (3) sharing images with consent rather than without it. Furthermore, participants were more willing to use their own devices to show both intimate and non-intimate images rather than posting on social media or directly sending others the image files. Drawing on descriptive quantitative and thematic qualitative analysis, the findings suggest that respondents perceive nonconsensual image sharing as being motivated by the desire to either bully, "show off," or for revenge. In addition, sharing intimate digital images of peers and romantic partners without consent was perceived to be troubling because it is abusive and/or can lead to abuse (when involving peers) and a violation of trust (when involving romantic partners).

Introduction

Sexting, a technology-enabled behavior that describes the sending, receiving, and forwarding of sexually explicit images within digital forms of communication, is a practice that has been met with various social, political, and legal concern (e.g., Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2012; Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016; D'Antona & Kevorkian, 2010; Diliberto & Matthey, 2009; Draper, 2012; Houck et al., 2014; Taylor, 2009; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016; Zirkel, 2009). While the rationales justifying these concerns vary based on the types of vested interests different stakeholders have, a common thread throughout is that sexting has the potential to generate negative, irreversible consequences for the involved parties. These consequences include peer pressure, suicidal ideation, cyberbullying, cyber-harassment, sexual shaming and stigmatization, sexual exploitation, and the pro-

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liferation of online child sexual abuse (e.g., Chalfen, 2009; Choi et al., 2016; Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015; Samimi & Alderson, 2014; Song, Song, & Lee, 2018; Stanley et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015). Other notable arguments in opposition of sexting, although based in religious values and belief systems, suggest that sexting eradicates youth innocence, encourages sexual perversion, promotes moral deterioration, and legitimizes sexual deviance (Peterson-Iyer, 2013).

Despite the general sense of unease exhibited by various stakeholders, there is an understanding that consensual sexting is not the same as nonconsensual, coercive image sharing (e.g., Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015; Hasinoff, 2012; Karaian, 2014; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Slane, 2013; Song et al., 2018). That is, a distinction is made between sexting among mutually consenting individuals, and intimate image sharing that is abusive and nonconsensual. An argument can be made that one of the reasons causing such public fear and anxiety around sexting is its potential to result in instances of nonconsensual pornography—which is the distribution of private sexual content (e.g., image or video) of other individuals without their consent (e.g., Burris, 2014; Cecil, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014; Humbach, 2014; Otero, 2015; Patton, 2015; Poole, 2015; Turngate, 2014; Waldman, 2016). To clarify, while moral and legal concerns have been expressed regarding consensual sexting behaviors (e.g., Choi et al., 2016; Draper, 2012; Houck et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2015)—especially when occurring among adolescents—the behavior’s potential to result in nonconsensual intimate image sharing is a notable factor contributing to the public fear and anxiety surrounding sexting practices (e.g., Baxter, 2013; D’Antona & Kevorkian, 2010; Diliberto & Matthey, 2009; Song et al., 2018; Taylor, 2009; Walker, 2016; Zirkel, 2009).

Research examining public attitudes of sexting point to a general agreement regarding the differences between consensual and nonconsensual intimate image sharing (see Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, & Rullo, 2013; Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014). For instance, Blyth and Roberts (2014) found strong support for the dismissal of legal charges for both the sender and the receiver who did not forward content onto other individuals. That is, the public differentially evaluated consensual sexting and nonconsensual image sharing, with the latter being perceived as most deserving of harsher penalties (Blyth & Roberts, 2014). These findings are consistent with Comartin and colleagues’ (2013) findings of lower support for harsh penalties for sexting by minors than by adults. These results illustrate the general public’s greater concern with the nonconsensual forwarding of intimate images than consensual sexting, revealing that people believe nonconsensual intimate image sharing should be addressed more harshly than consensual exchanges (Strassberg et al., 2013; Strohmaier et al., 2014). These findings are important in understanding how the public conceptualizes sexting and its associated consequences.

Despite public concern surrounding sexting and nonconsensual intimate image sharing, no studies to date have examined the public perceptions people have towards why individuals choose to participate in the aforementioned behaviors. Understanding how people perceive sexting and nonconsensual intimate image sharing is important because it helps explain how individuals view the symbolic value of their behaviors and how consequences related to these behaviors stem from said value. As will be discussed further in relation to our results, individuals frame behaviors such as image sharing as being imbued with symbolic value in relation to conveying messages about their image in the context of peer-groups and society more broadly. To this end, research has shown that the process of perceiving others’ behavioral motivations strongly influences one’s own behavior and formation of self (Miyamoto & Dornbush, 1956). These processes relate to the conceptualization and testing of “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In addition, responses to the behaviors of others reflect how

respondents view norms and values around image sharing (see Berndt, 1979; Prinstein & Wang, 2005; Rice et al., 2012; Walrave, Heirman, & Hallam, 2014).

Given this gap in the social science literature, this exploratory study will focus on establishing the groundwork of what the public perceptions are as to why individuals choose to participate in consensual and nonconsensual intimate image sharing. This inquiry provides an opportunity to consider the formation of ideas regarding how individuals and groups construct certain behaviors. While the current study has a relatively small sample size, it is the first to examine motivations of both behaviors using perception analyses. The implications of this study are discussed in detail.

Definitional Framework

Despite its rising popularity in academic inquiries, the sexting phenomenon is still one that lacks a uniform analytical foundation (Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011). As a result, the findings generated from previous studies have produced variations in definition and measurement regarding its motives, parameters, and theoretical frameworks (e.g., Ahern & Mechling, 2013; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2012; Samimi & Alderson, 2014; Song et al., 2018; Temple, Le, van den Berg, Ling, Paul, & Temple, 2014; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011; Zirkel, 2009).

Similarly, the scholarly trends in nonconsensual pornography have been limited in breadth—most taking the form of legal studies scholarship (e.g., Burris, 2014; Cecil, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014; Humbach, 2014; Otero, 2015; Patton, 2015; Poole, 2015; Turngate, 2014; Waldman, 2016). This suggests that while legal analyses on appropriate responses to nonconsensual pornography are rich, social science research are relatively scarce. However, unlike the varying working definitions of sexting, non-consensual pornography has been consistently recognized as denoting similar conventions (e.g., Citron & Franks, 2014; Humbach, 2014; Patton, 2015; Turngate, 2014; Williams, 2012).

Sexting

Sexting is generally interpreted as the sending, receiving, and forwarding of nude, semi-nude, or otherwise sexually explicit text messages, images, or videos via cell phone and/or other such electronic devices (e.g., Berger, 2009; Gordon-Messer et al., 2012; Judge, 2012; Lounsbury et al., 2011; Sinrod, 2010; Song et al., 2018; Taylor, 2009; Temple et al., 2014; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011; Zirkel, 2009). This definition is a combination of the various working definitions found across the sexting scholarship. In fact, there is a great amount of variation as to the actions (e.g., sending, receiving, forwarding), content (e.g., nude, semi-nude, sexually explicit), format (e.g., text messages, images, videos), and media (e.g., cell phones, Internet-based devices, computers, electronic devices) encompassed within the ranging definitions of sexting (e.g., Korenis & Billick, 2014; Lounsbury et al., 2011; Roche et al., 2015; Simpson, 2015; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2011; Williams, 2012; Zemmels & Khey, 2015). In addition, there are variations in whether a “sext” is sent by the involved individuals themselves or through external non-involved members; whether consent or abuse was involved; or whether there are differences between acceptable and unacceptable forms of sexting (e.g., Breese-Vitelli, 2011; Gamez-Gaudix, Almendros, Borrajo, & Calvete, 2015; Gillespie, 2013; Slane, 2013; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011). These variations point to a scattered empirical conceptualization of sexting that may be operationalized differently by different researchers (e.g., Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Henderson & Morgan, 2011; Lenhart, 2009; Lounsbury et al., 2011; Moore, 2012; Powell & Henry, 2014; Thomas & Cauffman, 2014).

Nonconsensual Pornography

The term nonconsensual pornography, also commonly referred to as “revenge porn,” is recognized as being the distribution of private sexual content (e.g., image or video) of other individuals without their consent (e.g., Burris, 2014; Cecil, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014; Humbach, 2014; Otero, 2015; Patton, 2015; Poole, 2015; Turngate, 2014; Waldman, 2016). Citron and Franks (2014) extend that nonconsensual pornography includes both the distribution of content initially obtained with (e.g., usually within private, confidential, or intimate relationships) and without consent (e.g., hidden recordings or produced via sexual assault and coercion). It is assumed that the perpetrator violated the consent to publish sexual contents which were obtained in the previous relationship if such behavior occurred after the departure of the relationship (e.g., Burris, 2014; Cecil, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014; Humbach, 2014; Otero, 2015; Patton, 2015; Poole, 2015; Stroud & Henson, 2016; Turngate, 2014; Waldman, 2016).

The reason for employing the term “nonconsensual pornography” over “revenge porn” is twofold. First, despite its frequent use and operationalization in both social and academic settings, the term “revenge porn” may lead to erroneous assumptions about the behavior and its motivations (see Poole, 2015). That is, while the term has the word “revenge” in it, the action is not always inspired by revenge or personal feelings of vitriol towards the victim (Franks, 2015; Poole, 2015). In fact, revenge porn may be motivated by monetary reasons (e.g., sextortion), the desire for more sexualized images and/or videos, relational power, peer pressure, and/or other personal emotions such as jealousy (Citron & Franks, 2014; Franks, 2015; Poole, 2015; Stroud & Henson, 2016). Secondly, the threshold for nonconsensual pornography is much lower than that of revenge porn, as the absence of consent is all that is needed to meet its criteria (e.g., Burris, 2014; Cecil, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014; Humbach, 2014; Otero, 2015; Patton, 2015; Poole, 2015; Turngate, 2014; Waldman, 2016). In other words, nonconsensual pornography captures the nature of the criminal act (e.g., violation of consent) without considering the varying motivations associated with the behavior.

Due to the term’s ability to encompass many types of nonconsensual intimate image sharing, the present study will operationalize the term nonconsensual pornography instead of the term revenge porn. The objective is to highlight the element of consent—or lack thereof—as the major component in discussions surrounding nonconsensual intimate image sharing.

Perceptions of Criminal Motivation

While numerous studies assessing perceptions of sanction threat and crimes have been conducted, studies focusing on perceptions of criminal motivation have been scarce. These types of studies are significant in that they can be used to compare whether popular perceptions of criminal motivation are consistent with actual offender dispositions. Moreover, these studies have shown that public attitude and perception informed and shaped public policies (e.g., Apel, 2013; Dodge, Bosick, & Antwerp, 2013; Russo, Roccatto, & Viento, 2013; Schoepfer, Carmichael, & Piquero, 2007).

Currently, the few empirical studies that have examined perceptions of criminal motivation have considered whether knowledge of an offender’s criminal motivation influence attributions about the culpability of victims and perpetrators (e.g., Angelone, Mitchell, & Lucente, 2012; Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009; Sizemore, 2013; Sahl & Keene, 2012). The primary objective of these studies was to determine how influential knowledge of an individual’s criminal motivation is on how one perceives that person to be guilty and responsible for crime. Mitchell and colleagues (2009) revealed that participants were more likely to describe a scenario as rape, recommend a longer prison sentence, and assign less blame to the victim, when they were told that the offender’s criminal act was

motivated by violence as opposed to motivated by sex. This is consistent with a later study conducted by Angelone and colleagues (2012) in their finding that knowledge of an offender's motivation, as well as observers' gender role attitudes, are influential in affecting attributions about the culpability of victims and perpetrators of date rape.

It is important to note that these studies did not inquire about people's perceptions of offender motivations. Instead, they provided knowledge of an offender's motivation and sought to determine whether such information influenced how one perceived the offender's criminal culpability. These are two distinct types of analyses, as the one asking about people's perceptions of offender motivation aims to uncover public beliefs as to what motivates individuals who choose to engage in criminal behavior, whereas studies providing participants with various offender motives aims to uncover whether particular motivations are regarded as more serious, thereby requiring harsher punishment.

The present study explores the public perceptions regarding why individuals believe others participate in nonconsensual pornography, providing an opportunity to consider the formation of ideas about how specific and generalized others might construct certain behaviors. An interesting aspect of this study is whether people attribute the causes of nonconsensual pornography to internal factors (e.g., personality traits) or external factors (e.g., relationship issues). Relatedly, this study explores the variations in perception based on the presence and/or absent of consent, identity of the recipient, content of the image, and the medium(s) used. This is the first study of its kind to explicitly compare and examine perceptions of nonconsensual pornography motivations with consensual intimate image sharing. The study offers an exploratory foundation upon which future studies can develop understandings of these behaviors from symbolic interactive perspectives, while also developing more robust instruments for examining actual offenders.

Methods

The current study recruited a sample of 63 participants who completed an online, mixed methods questionnaire. The survey initially generated 67 respondents, but due to four of the surveys being incomplete, they were omitted from the analysis. Respondents were recruited through a purposive sampling method, whereby an online questionnaire was disseminated and posted by the researchers to various social media websites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit). The link to the questionnaire was posted online from August 30 to September 24, 2016.

To increase participant totals, respondents were asked if they were willing to post and/or disseminate the online survey link on their own frequented social media platforms. Respondents were made aware at the beginning of this request that their involvement was voluntary, and that they were under no obligation to participate in the study or to refer additional respondents. A total of fifteen respondents agreed to post and/or disseminate the online survey link on their own social media forums[†].

The survey link provided respondents with a description of the present study, the IRB protections granted to all participants, the consent form, and justifications for participation in the study. To ensure

[†]Participants who agreed to redistribute the questionnaire were given the survey's hyperlink at the completion of their survey participation. The study did not ask those who agreed to redistribute the questionnaire whether they actually did so, as there may have been individuals who, despite volunteering to redistribute the survey online, did not feel comfortable doing so. These individuals were not contacted further regarding their involvement in the redistribution process. In addition, there was no way to determine whether participants completed the questionnaire through the originally posted link or the re-posted link as this information was not tracked. The study did not track how many respondents participated through these re-posted links for confidentiality and privacy reasons.

anonymity, no names or signatures were required—consent was obtained through a check-box feature that was built into the survey platform. Participants were not obligated to complete the survey in its entirety and had the option to leave the platform at any time. No enticements were provided as participation in the study was voluntary.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics*

Demographic Characteristics	Study Sample (n=63)
Sex:	
Female	66.67% (n=42)
Male	33.33% (n=21)
Student Status:	
Student	61.90% (n=39)
Non-Student	38.10% (n=24)
Age:	
18-25	82.54% (n=52)
26-30	12.70% (n=8)
31-40	1.59% (n=1)
41+	3.17% (n=2)
Race:	
Caucasian	41.27% (n=26)
Black	7.94% (n=5)
East Asian	33.33% (n=21)
South Asian	1.59% (n=1)
West Indian/Caribbean	4.76% (n=3)
Bi-Racial/Other	11.11% (n=7)
Sexual Orientation:	
Heterosexual	85.72% (n=54)
Homosexual	4.76% (n=3)
Bisexual	4.76% (n=3)
Asexual	3.17% (n=2)
Pansexual	1.59% (n=1)
Current Relationship Status:	
Single	41.27% (n=26)
Dating	49.21% (n=31)
Engaged	3.17% (n=2)
Married	6.35% (n=4)
Romantic Relationship History:	
Yes	82.54% (n=52)
No	17.46% (n=11)

Table 1 presents the demographic makeup of the sample, which consisted of a majority Caucasian, female, student, heterosexual, currently and formerly experienced (dating), 18-to-25-year-old participant body. While Caucasian (race) and currently dating (current relationship status) made up the majority in their categories, they were only slightly larger than East Asian (race) and single (current relationship status), respectively. Though this sample cannot be considered representative of the general population, the primary concern of this study is individuals' perceptions towards rationales for consensual and nonconsensual intimate image sharing, and not with links between demographic characteristics and these perceptions.

The questionnaire distributed in the study contained 35 questions (29 multiple-choice and 6 open-ended), asking participants to indicate both their willingness to engage in sexting and nonconsensual pornography, as well as their perceptions on why they believed others might partake in them. To ensure anonymity, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.).

Properties and Measures: Multiple-Choice Questions

The current study consisted of three sets of multiple choice questions that examined respondents' willingness to engage in hypothetical instances of sexting and nonconsensual pornography, as well as their perceptions on why they believed others might partake in the aforementioned behaviors. Respondents were first asked whether they would engage in intimate and non-intimate image sharing with their peers and romantic partners in cases involving and lacking consent. A second set of questions asked participants whether they would share intimate and non-intimate images of their peers and romantic partners with others (e.g., intimate/non-intimate images of peers to romantic partners, and intimate/non-intimate images of romantic partners to peers). The last set of multiple choice questions asked respondents to indicate whether the medium used to share digital images had any effect on their willingness to share both intimate and non-intimate images with their peers and romantic partners (e.g., posting on social media, flashing on one's own device, and sending the file).

In order to clarify some of the potentially ambiguous key terms and concepts used within the questionnaire, definitions of the following terms were given to participants: "Sharing," "non-consensually," "intimate digital images," "non-intimate digital images," and "share on own device" (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. *Definition of Terms Provided in Questionnaire*

Term	Definition
"Sharing"	"Uploading, disseminating, showing/flashing, or sending of digital pictures from one party to another"
"Non-consensually"	"Not having the permission of the individual(s) in question. In other words, in a party of more than one individual, if even one person does not grant permission to conduct a given act and/or behavior, that agreement would be bound as being committed non-consensually"
"Non-intimate digital images"	"Any image captured and produced electronically (cameras, computers, phones, etc.) that does not have nude, semi-nude, or otherwise sexually provocative content. While deeming something as sexual is subjective, the term "non-intimate" here refers to the general, sexual nature of the content being displayed (i.e. a graduation photo of an individual with a convocation gown would be classified as non-intimate because it does not bear a sexual connotation, nor shows an individual being nude or semi-nude)"
"Intimate digital images"	"Any image depicting nude, semi-nude, or otherwise sexually provocative content. While the image does not have to be sexual, the image does have to be sexually provocative"
"Flashing on own device"	"Letting them view the images as it appears on your own device"

Properties and Measures: Image Sharing, Consent, and Recipient

The first set of questions focused on whether participants would engage in intimate and non-intimate image sharing based on the presence and absence of consent and the recipient involved. The survey intentionally distinguished peers and romantic partners as separate recipient categories to see if the receiver's identity had any impact on participants' willingness to share intimate and non-intimate digital images. These questions did not require any admission of conduct or experience, as they were all presented as hypothetical scenarios of image sharing. The results of this set are shown in Table 3.

Properties of Measures: Image Sharing, Content, and Recipient

The second set of multiple-choice questions focused on whether participants would share intimate and non-intimate images of their peers and romantic partners with a non-involved third party (e.g., intimate/non-intimate images of peers to romantic partners, and intimate/non-intimate images of romantic partners to peers). The purpose of these questions were to identify whether participants were more willing to share intimate and non-intimate images of their peers and romantic partners based on the content of the image (i.e., who is depicted in the images) and the recipient (e.g., peers or romantic partners). Similar to the first set of questions, the survey intentionally distinguished peers and romantic partners as separate recipient categories to see if the receiver's identity had any impact on people's willingness to share intimate and non-intimate digital images. The content of the images were also separated into two categories (e.g., peers and romantic partners) to see if the identity of the person depicted in the image had any impact on people's willingness to share. Consistent with the former set of questions, these also did not require admissions of conduct, as they were all presented as one's willingness to participate in hypothetical scenarios. The results of this set are shown in Table 4.

Properties of Measures: Image Sharing, Content, and Medium

The last set of multiple-choice questions focused on whether the medium used to share digital images had any effect on participants' willingness to share both intimate and non-intimate images with their peers and romantic partners. Three options were presented: (1) posting on social media, (2) flashing images through one's own device, and (3) sending the image file directly. The purpose of these questions were to identify whether participants were more likely to share images based on the content of the image and the medium employed. This last set also distinguished peers and romantic partners into separate categories to see if the image content had any impact on people's willingness to use different media in sharing intimate and non-intimate images. These questions also did not require any admission of conduct. The results of this set are shown in Table 5.

Properties of Measures: Open-ended Qualitative Questions

In order to obtain more expressive written responses to the current inquiry, the questionnaire had a set of six open-ended qualitative questions asking respondents about their thoughts and attitudes towards nonconsensual pornography committed against peers and romantic partners. The objective of this set was to determine whether there were any common themes among respondents' perceptions on the factors influencing nonconsensual pornography—namely, the factors that motivate people to commit nonconsensual pornography, and why engaging in such acts would pose problems, if any.

Analytical Framework

Perception studies are different from inquiries examining the confirmed rationale of offenders, but they are nonetheless useful. In this case, there are multiple reasons why the current study adopts a perception-based approach. In asking participants to share their perceptions of why others might engage in a behavior, the researchers avoid asking participants to admit to acts which they might be hesitant to do so. This approach also captures components of how participants view symbolic representations of behaviors, their consequences, and thus, their own potential navigation of symbolic values tied to these behaviors.

Both of the above rationales for perception analysis in this study relate to the concepts presented in symbolic interactionism—namely, that management of embarrassment is a primary function within daily interactions, and that this management operates by drawing on perceptions of how others view certain behaviors and their symbolic qualities (Scheff, 2011). Relatedly, there is empirical support that

the process of perceiving others’ behavioral motivations and reactions to one’s own behaviors strongly impacts one’s own behavior and formation of self (Miyamoto & Dornbush, 1956). Such processes relate to the conceptualization and testing of “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and in the current study, reflect interactions between concepts of the self and social and cultural capitals (see Figure 1 below).

We hypothesize that three primary groups of actors influence respondents’ attitudes toward image sharing: (1) general others (e.g., societal values/norms), (2) immediate others (e.g., friends and family), and (3) actual or hypothetical romantic partners. These groups provide an influence through language in a variety of forms (e.g., education, both formal and informal) and from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, should play a critical role in forming how respondents view themselves in relation to image sharing, which we argue should manifest in their responses regarding the hypothetical behaviors of others. In other words, by capturing perceptions about image sharing, we aim to understand both how individuals frame their own possible behaviors, but also the social and cultural contexts in which symbolic values are attributed to images and their uses.

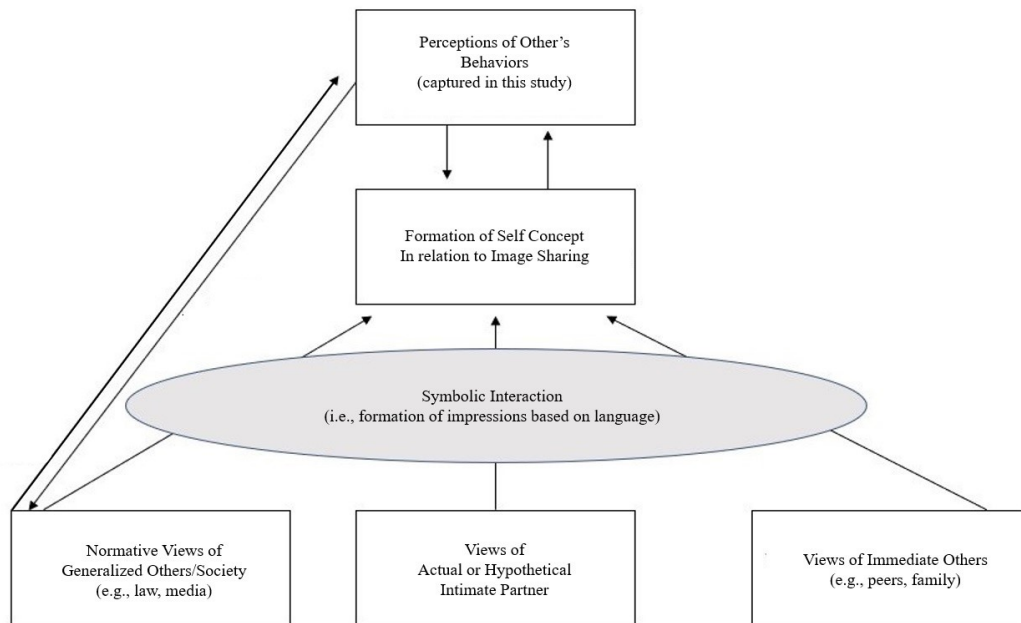


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Given this analytical orientation and the nature of the data, we adopted a primarily qualitative focus in understanding the phenomenon at hand. Though we point to some basic descriptive quantitative characteristics of our findings, our primary aim is to provide a qualitative analysis. The use of online data collection combined with qualitative questionnaires provide opportunities for participants to voice their perspectives anonymously and with a relative degree of freedom with respect to the range and nature of responses (Neville, Adams, & Cook, 2016). In the current study, this freedom allowed for the analysis of the aforementioned link between formation of personal attitudes and beliefs, as well as

self-image, with respect to the behaviors of others, as respondents had opportunities to reflect on both their own behavior and that of others in an anonymous context. We aimed to capture these dynamics through perception analysis, meaning we asked participants how they perceived certain behaviors, regardless of whether they had engaged in them personally. One benefit of this approach is that it captured more data regarding image sharing where otherwise respondents would potentially have little to say, as these dynamics are not necessarily central to questions raised in research around problematic online behaviors in the data collection phrase. In other words, inquiring into participants' perceptions rather than behaviors allowed us to consider how they see the behaviors of others in relation to their own ethical self-concepts, and how these self-concepts operate symbolically in reference to social and cultural norms.

All open-ended responses were labeled and categorized into themes based on their content similarities. A total of 8 themes were generated from the data. In some cases, the thematic labels were generated by the authors, while others emerged from the content itself as what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as "in vivo codes" (i.e., when the respondents' phrasing and/or words are taken directly to form the label of the code). While most individual responses were coded under a single theme, there were also instances where individual responses were coded into multiple themes that were not conceptually contradictory.

Results

This section provides a brief descriptive overview of the quantitative results of our research, highlighting qualitative exemplars that further illustrate their importance to our overall thesis. Each subsection underscores a significant concept, laying the framework for the subsequent discussion of theoretical implications in the discussion section. We relate each of these concepts to the nature of the recipients involved (i.e., intimate partner or peers).

Image Sharing Based on Consent

The first set of multiple-choice responses indicated that approximately 11% of participants would be open to consensually sharing intimate images of themselves with their peers. This implies that the majority of respondents are unwilling to consensually share intimate digital images with their peers. In contrast, approximately 56% of respondents stated that they would be open to consensually sharing intimate digital images of themselves with their romantic partners. Based on these particular findings, we begin with a baseline understanding that our participants are more comfortable with consensually sharing intimate digital images of themselves with their romantic partners than with their peers.

With regards to nonconsensual image sharing among peers and romantic partners, only 3% of respondents indicated that they would be open to sharing intimate images of themselves with their peers without consent. The majority of participants reported that they would not be open to sharing intimate images of themselves with their peers without consent. In terms of intimate image sharing with romantic partners, only about 22% of participants stated that they would be open to sharing without consent. While this figure is higher in count than the one involving peers, the majority of respondents indicated similar sentiments in that they would not be open to sharing intimate images of themselves with their romantic partners without consent. These findings suggest that while the majority of respondents would not be open to consensually and/or nonconsensually sharing intimate images of themselves with peers, a greater number of respondents would be open to sharing intimate images of themselves with their romantic partners if consent is present, in comparison to when consent is absent. In other words, while approximately 8% more of respondents stated that they would be open to sharing intimate images of themselves with their peers if consent were present, 33% more

of respondents stated that they would be open to sharing intimate images of themselves with their romantic partner if consent were present. This shows that the number of participants willing to share intimate images of themselves with peers is lower than that with romantic partners regardless of consent.

When respondents were asked why they thought people would share private digital images of their peers and romantic partners without consent, the most common thematic response for peers was bullying and to brag, flaunt, or show off for approval for romantic partners. The motives behind sharing images without consent was highlighted by P1: “[while] people would normally share private images of their peers in order to humiliate them [their peers],” people would share private images of their romantic partners without consent “probably to indicate how hot or sexy his/her romantic partner is.” This perception that violating a romantic partner’s privacy increases the perpetrator’s pride and reputation is further illustrated in P2’s remark that people share intimate digital images of their romantic partners without consent out of “narcissism; ego. For example, ‘Look at how hot this girl I banged was.’” This suggests that people believe others engage in nonconsensual pornography towards their peers to bring their peers down, whereas in that of romantic partners, is to bring themselves up to a higher status.

When respondents were asked if they perceived sharing intimate digital images of peers and romantic partners without consent to be troubling, the majority of respondents answered yes—that any kind of intimate image sharing without consent is troubling. The most common thematic responses regarding intimate images of peers were that it is abusive and/or can lead to abuse, whereas the most common theme for intimate images of romantic partners without consent was because it is a violation of trust. It is interesting to note that while a violation of trust can also be categorized as abuse, respondents felt the need to mention the word “trust” when romantic partners were involved. This appears to be similar to the finding that respondents may be more protective and careful with sharing intimate images of their romantic partner with peers than vice-versa. The trust in romantic relationships may make intimate images of romantic partners merit more attention and value than intimate images of peers, reinforcing the social-contextual nature of how image sharing is perceived.

Table 3. *Hypothetical Scenarios of Image Sharing*

Type of Image Sharing/ Consent Involved	Recipient of Images Peers	Romantic Partner
Intimate Images of Oneself/ Someone else with Consent	Yes: 11.11% (n=7)	Yes: 55.56% (n=35)
	No: 77.78% (n=49)	No: 34.92% (n=22)
	Indifferent: 11.11% (n=7)	Indifferent: 9.52% (n=6)
Intimate Images of Oneself/ Someone else without Consent	Yes: 3.17% (n=2)	Yes: 22.22% (n=14)
	No: 96.83% (n=61)	No: 77.78% (n=49)
Non-Intimate Images of Oneself/ Someone else with Consent	Yes: 82.54% (n=52)	Yes: 92.07% (n=58)
	No: 11.11% (n=7)	No: 3.17% (n=2)
	Indifferent: 6.35% (n=4)	Indifferent: 4.76% (n=3)
Non-Intimate Images of Oneself/ Someone else without Consent	Yes: 58.73% (n=37)	Yes: 68.25% (n=43)
	No: 41.27% (n=26)	No: 31.75% (n=20)

Image Sharing Based on Content

In terms of participants’ willingness to consensually share non-intimate digital images with peers, an 83% majority stated that they would be open to consensually sharing non-intimate digital images with peers. Similarly, 92% of respondents claimed that they would be willing to consensually share non-intimate digital images with their romantic partners. With regards to sharing non-intimate digi-

tal images without consent, approximately 59% of respondents indicated that they would be open to sharing these images with peers and 68% with romantic partners. Based on these findings (see Table 3), the intimacy of the images and the presence of consent may serve as factors in determining one's willingness to share images with peers and romantic partners, with participants being more willing to share non-intimate images over intimate images, and more willing to participate if consent is involved rather than when it is not.

Content can also be framed with respect to whether an image was sent with the initial intention of being shared (i.e., whether consent to share was given at some point). When asked what might motivate someone who initially had consent to then send intimate images of their peers and romantic partners without ongoing or further-confirmed consent, the two most common thematic responses were for revenge and assume consent is constant and/or carried over. This is particularly interesting due to the differences in response when initial consent was absent. When consent was non-existent to begin with, nonconsensual sharing was perceived to be committed against peers for injurious purposes and against romantic partners for self-glorification reasons. However, in cases where initial consent was provided, the rationales of both shifted towards sentiments of vitriol (i.e., revenge) and negligence (i.e., assumed consent). Of the two, the theme associated with negligence (assume consent is constant and/or carried over) is the one unique to this change in circumstance. P3 described this theme of negligence as, "they feel the need to have consent before sharing intimate photos, but do not realize that it is necessary to gain consent after the first occurrence."

Based on the findings in Table 4, approximately 16% of participants indicated that they would share intimate images of their peers with their romantic partners. In contrast, only 6% of respondents stated that they would share intimate images of their romantic partners with their peers. An equal amount of approximately 81% of respondents claimed that they would share non-intimate images of their peers with their romantic partners, and non-intimate images of their romantic partners with their peers. These findings generally suggest that the majority of participants would be unwilling to share intimate images of another party (e.g., peers or romantic partners) with others, indicating a reluctance to share intimate images of others with non-involved parties. These findings further suggest that respondents are more willing to share digital images of peers and/or romantic partners to other non-involved parties if the images in question are non-intimate. When intimate images are involved, respondents are more willing to share pictures of their peers with their romantic partners than intimate images of their romantic partners with their peers.

Table 4. *Image Sharing Based on Content and Recipient*

Type of Images and Recipient	Study Sample (n=63)
Intimate Images of Peers to Romantic Partner	Yes: 15.87% (n=10) No: 84.13% (n=53)
Intimate Images of Romantic Partner to Peers	Yes: 6.35% (n=4) No: 93.65% (n=59)
Non-Intimate Images of Peers to Romantic Partner	Yes: 80.95% (n=51) No: 19.05% (n=12)
Non-Intimate Images of Romantic Partner to Peers	Yes: 80.95% (n=51) No: 19.05% (n=12)

The concept that consent operates as a factor in the formation of the perceived nature of the content of an image, and thus whether and with whom it is shared, was further reinforced by P4's remarks:

For a lot of people, the initial consent is all they need. After that they can turn around and say that they had said yes initially and ignore their change of heart. Once they've said yes once and no that followed tends to be ignored. A pig-headed ignoring an individual's wishes.

While revenge and other injurious motives are still taken into account when initial consent is abused, respondents were more inclined to perceive that people were either negligent or ignorant regarding the need for obtaining ongoing consent in situations where initial consent was provided. In other words, in cases where consent was initially given to the perpetrator, respondents felt that individuals might have disseminated the images to other parties due to a lack of understanding towards the meaning of consent, thus prompting consideration into how consent relates to perceptions of the nature of an image over time, not just in a static or one-time framework. It is interesting to note the shift from intentional actions of harm to a possibly genuine lack of understanding of consent. This implies that nonconsensual pornography committed without initial consent is perceived more culpable than nonconsensual pornography committed with initial consent, and that images are subjectively understood in the context of social constructions of consent.

Image Sharing Based on Medium

According to Table 5, respondents indicated a slight preference for “flashing on one’s own device” over “uploading it onto social media” when sharing non-intimate digital images of both peers and romantic partners. In terms of sharing intimate images of peers and romantic partners, respondents once again favored the “flashing on one’s own device” method over both the “social media” and “sending the file” methods. While they are very similar in count, respondents showed a slight preference for flashing intimate images of peers on their own device in comparison to romantic partners. These findings suggest that using one’s own device to show both intimate and non-intimate images of peers and romantic partners is preferred.

Table 5. *Image Sharing Based on Medium Involved*

Type of Medium Involved	Non-Intimate Images of Peers	Intimate Images of Peers	Non-Intimate Images of Romantic Partner	Intimate Images of Romantic Partner
Social Media	Yes: 82.54% (n=52) No: 17.46% (n=11)	Yes: 6.35% (n=4) No: 93.65% (n=59)	Yes: 84.13% (n=53) No: 15.87% (n=10)	Yes: 6.35% (n=4) No: 93.65% (n=59)
Flashing on Own Device	Yes: 85.71% (n=54) No: 14.29% (n=9)	Yes: 12.70% (n=8) No: 87.30% (n=55)	Yes: 92.06% (n=58) No: 7.94% (n=5)	Yes: 7.94% (n=5) No: 92.06% (n=58)
Sending File		Yes: 4.76% (n=3) No: 95.24% (n=60)		Yes: 6.35% (n=4) No: 93.65% (n=59)

Despite the majority of participants expressing their concern with sharing intimate digital images without consent, there were four responses (i.e., two involving peers and two involving romantic partners as the content of the image) that indicated opposite sentiments with regards to these behaviors. These responses reflected nuances around the interaction between concepts of consent, motive, perceived threat of sanctions, and medium (e.g., flashing on one’s device or through online platforms). With regards to nonconsensually sharing intimate images of peers, P6 stated that:

Personally, I have no trouble posting images of my peers considering the immediate people around me don't take intimate pictures, and even if I did, there's a possibi-

lity no one would know I did it. However, I don't only out of consideration. Today, it's easier to upload images without someone's consent without leaving any digital footprint behind (unless you get an expert to trace it), and I find it to be very rude and the poster to be immature and in dire need of proper schooling.

While P6 attributed the perpetrator with being “rude,” “immature,” and “in dire need of proper schooling,” an explicit claim was made that “I have no trouble posting images of my peers.” The motivation for this behavior is credited to the unlikelihood of being caught. This suggests that, regardless of whether one shares intimate images with peers, the chance of repercussions for the sender may influence engagement in the behavior. This same rationale is echoed in relation to intimate images of romantic partners in P6’s reflection:

In regards to a digital image of a romantic partner on one's own personal device (phone), then it's not too troubling because the only people who look at/through the phone will only be you and a select few people (unless you're the type of person who lets anyone go through their phone). Unlike posting onto social media, you can control who and how many people see the image of your romantic partner.

Unlike the response given towards sharing intimate images of peers without consent, P6 specifies the medium of choice that would enhance the most security in conducting such behaviors—namely, the “flash on one’s own device” method. This is consistent with the other findings that suggest respondents would much rather flash the intimate images using one’s own device rather than upload them onto social media or directly send others the image file(s). The main factor that makes this behavior non-troublesome for P6 is the amount of exposure and harm the selected medium will induce for the victim. While P6 implies that nonconsensually posting intimate images onto social media may be problematic, flashing people with their own devices is less troublesome because of its limited capacity to spread, generate harm, and be caught.

Discussion

The current study sought to explore individuals’ perceptions on why they believed others partake in sexting and nonconsensual pornography, providing an opportunity to consider the intersection between perception of different types of others in relation to perceptions of deviant behavior and formation of personal behaviors. More specifically, the study’s aim was to establish public perceptions regarding why individuals choose to participate in nonconsensual pornography by examining how individuals perceive motivations for intimate image sharing with and without consent. This study incorporated types of consent (i.e., presence and absence), identity of the recipient (i.e., peers and romantic partners), content of the image (i.e., intimate and non-intimate), subject of image (i.e., peers and romantic partners), and the medium used (i.e., social media, flashing on own device, and sending file) within its analysis—all of which play critical roles in the social construction of both the acceptance of image sharing and the value that sharing imparts on the parties involved.

Three major conclusions were drawn regarding participants’ openness to engage in sexting and nonconsensual pornography: The majority of respondents favored the concepts of (1) sharing images with romantic partners over peers; (2) sharing non-intimate images over intimate images; and (3) sharing images with consent rather than without it. These patterns are consistent regardless of the medium and recipient involved.

It is interesting that respondents suggested a link between nonconsensual intimate image sharing among peers and negative motives, whereas they generally established more positive motives

(e.g., acquisition of status) when sharing images consensually. Both linkages suggest a conscious consideration of how image sharing is framed within the context of self-concept and social capital through the symbolic value of the images shared and nature in which they are shared.

The finding that individuals prefer sharing intimate images with romantic partners over peers builds on previous research that found relationship status to be a significant factor in intimate image sharing practices (Gordon-Messer et al., 2012; Weisskirch and Delevi, 2011). It is important to note that while image sharing has and continues to occur among peers and unfamiliar persons, research has shown that the behavior often occurs among those involved in romantic relationships (e.g., Samimi and Alderson, 2014; Weisskirch and Delevi, 2011).

The finding that individuals prefer sharing intimate images with consent over without consent can be explained by previous studies that have expressed intimate image sharing as a form of flirtation—a medium for sexual exploration and private, intimate social interactions within technological environments with which participants are comfortable (e.g., Ahern and Mechling, 2013; Chalfen, 2009; Gillespie, 2013; Hasinoff, 2014; Peterson-Iyer, 2013; Roche et al., 2015; Samimi and Alderson, 2014; Simpson, 2015; Taylor, 2009; Walker et al., 2011). Exchanging intimate images among consenting partners has been documented as early dating rituals for which to garner intimacy and/or to keep somebody interested (Campbell and Park, 2014; Korenis and Billick, 2014; Weissrich and Delevi, 2011).

When intimate images were involved, respondents were more willing to positively perceive the sharing of images of their peers with their romantic partners than images of their romantic partners with their peers. This suggests that respondents may be more protective and careful with sharing intimate images of their romantic partners with peers than vice-versa, suggesting that “immediate others” (see Figure 1) play a pivotal role in decisions about image sharing, but that such decisions may still operate against the backdrop of normative or generalized others. Regardless of these perceptions, it is important to note that respondents pointed to the role of image sharing in obtaining cultural capital.

In terms of individuals’ perceptions of nonconsensual pornography, there seems to be a belief that people share intimate images of their peers and romantic partners without consent to bully peers and to brag, flaunt, or show off for approval when involving romantic partners. This is interesting given the differences in motivation attributed to the same behavior—a negative emotional motive involving images of peers and a positive emotional motive for images involving romantic partners. In addition, there seems to be a perception that revenge and/or assuming consent is constant and/or carried over is the motivation for someone to violate initially obtained consent involving intimate images of peers and romantic partners. The negative motivations associated with images involving peers corroborates previous research that found the intent to cause harm and/or embarrassment as motivations to engage in nonconsensual pornography (e.g., Ahern and Mechling, 2013; Chalfen, 2009; Jones, 2017; Khandaker, 2016; McIntyre, 2016; Peterson-Iyer, 2013; Samimi and Alderson, 2014).

In addition, sharing intimate digital images of peers and romantic partners without consent was commonly perceived to be troubling because it is abusive and/or can lead to abuse (when involving peers) and a violation of trust (when involving romantic partners). These findings relate to previous studies that discuss the social and psychological consequences (e.g., cyberbullying, sexual shaming, online harassment, embarrassment, peer pressure, depression, and suicidal ideation) that may result from intimate image sharing (e.g., Ahern and Mechling, 2013; Chalfen, 2009; Lee et al., 2016; Peterson-Iyer, 2013; Samimi and Alderson, 2014; Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2015).

In terms of the preferred medium of use, participants were more willing to use their own devices to show both intimate and non-intimate images of either party rather than posting on social media or directly sending people the image file(s). This suggests that respondents may be aware of the permanency of posting and/or sending a digital image online versus simply flashing it for viewers on one's own device. Despite all three behaviors constituting acts of nonconsensual pornography, when asked to choose between the options provided, respondents chose the medium that gives them the most control over the image, and the one most likely to warrant the least amount of social and legal ramification. Again, this suggests that participants form their perception of these behaviors within a social and cultural context that relies on framing oneself in the context of others in a way that may be more nuanced than the extant literature suggests.

Limitations

A limitation of the current study is its use of an online questionnaire. While the employment of an online survey made recruiting participants easier in terms of speed and accessibility, there was no way to ensure that respondents would answer all of the questions provided in the survey. In addition, given that the study asks personal questions through a self-reporting medium, the possibility of participants hiding their true thoughts and attitudes due to the sensitivity of the questions must be considered. Even though the questions being asked were posed in hypothetical terms, since the survey was conducted through a self-reporting process, the possibility of retaining inaccurate and/or misleading data must be taken into consideration.

The small convenience sample of the study is also a notable limitation that must be considered. Given that the sample was recruited primarily through the researchers' social network, the findings may not be representative of the general population. Relatedly, the small sample size hinders the generalizability of the findings to other population groups and demographics.

Another limitation of the current study is its failure to collect any sociodemographic data pertaining to religiosity or political affiliation. Such information may have been useful in examining whether certain belief systems impact perceptions of consensual and nonconsensual image sharing (see Peterson-Iyer, 2013). Future studies would benefit from analyzing the relationship between these sociodemographic variables and individuals' perceptions of consensual and nonconsensual intimate image sharing.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates a disapproval of people who engage in nonconsensual pornography. Although the phenomenon is relatively new to social science research, enough information has shown that it is a serious problem that requires more research. It is important not only to study the risks and effects of sexting, but also to focus on the perception of the boundary between consensual and nonconsensual intimate image sharing. The current study provides an outlook on the public perceptions people have as to why individuals might partake in nonconsensual pornography towards both peers and romantic partners.

The current study offers new insight into the perceptions of what people believe motivates individuals to engage in nonconsensual pornography. This is the first study of its kind to explicitly examine nonconsensual pornography motivations using perception analyses. The findings of this research can be used to substantiate whether these popular perceptions are accurate in relation to actual offender motivations. As such, future studies would benefit from using these perceptions to test whether actual offender motivations align with public perceptions of nonconsensual pornography. Lastly, future

research would benefit from considering how socially constructed norms (or their perception) interact with held beliefs about close peers and romantic partners, particularly as these dynamics influence self-image within the intersection of media-technology, society, and culture.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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