

# **Image-Based Sexual Abuse: Online Communities and the Broader Misogynistic Landscape**

## **Abstract**

This article offers an in-depth examination of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) platforms and considers how they intersect within broader pornographic and misogynistic cultures online. Research was conducted on two websites which openly condone the sharing and viewing of non-consensually shared sexual images to examine user motivations, behaviour, and culture. Using a feminist lens, the article presents evidence of significant cultural differences and motivations for image sharing and website use across platforms, as well as the increasing ‘pornification’ of IBSA images. More broadly, the article considers how the behaviours and attitudes amongst IBSA communities are replicated within the growing misogynistic landscape online. In doing so, it considers how male peer support theory and digital criminology can help to understand current, and future, forms of online misogyny.

## **Keywords**

Image Based Sexual Abuse, Revenge Pornography, Misogyny, Pornography, Online Culture.

Attention to the non-consensual sharing of images (colloquially known as ‘revenge pornography’), increased in 2010 after the creation of IsAnyoneUp.com by Hunter Moore. He created the website to post nude images of his ex-partners and encouraged website visitors to follow suit by submitting images of former partners with a commentary of why they deserved to be featured. He would publish personal information including names, locations, and links to social networks (known as ‘doxxing’) of those featured within the images (Lee, 2012a). This resulted in a high volume of users commenting on the images, with criticisms about the victims’ attractiveness being common (Lee, 2012b). When victims found their images online and contacted Moore requesting image removal they were often met with refusals and openly ridiculed on the website (Lee, 2012a; Lee, 2012b). Within three months, more than 10,000 images were submitted to the website and the platform was averaging between 150,000 and 240,000 unique page views in 2011. In April 2012 Moore sold the site to BullyVille, an anti-bullying organisation, and the site was closed down (Lee, 2012b). However, we have continued to see an emergence of copycat websites and message board threads designed for the same purpose (Henry and Flynn, 2019).

In 2015 the disclosing of private sexual photographs or films without the consent of the person depicted, and with intent to cause that individual distress, was criminalised within the UK under Section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act (Crown Prosecution Service, 2017). Criminalisation has also occurred on an international scale including in Australia (Yar and Drew, 2019) and the US (Rosenberg and Dacig-Rosenberg, 2022). Whilst this move was internationally welcomed by scholars, victims, organisations and activists, legislation has focused upon the criminalisation of individual action and does not criminalise the hosting of platforms which condone and encourage the publication of this material. Essentially, there are a range of online platforms which not only provide easily accessible spaces to share this content, but they also provide users with anonymity reducing user inhibitions and the likelihood of social and legal reprimand (Franca, 2018; Suler, 2004).

This article presents data collected from two non-consensual image sharing platforms with the aim of examining the nature and culture of these spaces, uncovering potential user motivations, and contextualising the findings within broader pornographic and misogynistic culture online. It begins with an overview of existing research in the field and the contributions this research makes to this surrounding literature. An overview of the methods utilised is then provided, including sampling, ethical considerations, and data analysis. The article presents three key findings and conclusions. Firstly, that websites which host non-consensually shared images are not homogenous. Secondly, non-consensually shared images are becoming ‘pornified’ by both users and website hosts. Lastly, that behaviour evident on these websites broadly resembles male behaviour on other misogynistic online platforms whose primary purpose is *not* the non-consensual sharing of images. The article therefore draws attention to the need to understand these forms of abuse within the broader contexts and how male peer support theory and digital criminology can offer insight into current and future forms of online abuse.

## **Literature Review**

Non-consensual image sharing falls under the broad umbrella of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) which is defined as the non-consensual taking, making, and sharing (or threats to share) sexual images (Law Commission, 2021; McGlynn *et al.*, 2017). Behaviours falling within this definition have increasingly become recognised as forms of abuse (Cyber Civil Rights, 2014; Huber, 2022); McGlynn *et al.*, 2019). Existing literature surrounding IBSA has tended to focus upon legal debates, primarily the need for criminalisation and legislative change (see Citron

and Franks, 2014; Stroud, 2014; Tariq, 2014), as well as the impact on victims (see Bloom, 2014; Citron and Franks, 2014; Franks, 2011; Henry and Powell, 2016; Huber, 2022; McGlynn *et al.*, 2020). To the researcher's knowledge, there are only four studies which have sought to provide an understanding of these platforms, leaving our knowledge in this area very limited (Hall and Hearn, 2018; Henry and Flynn, 2019; Langlois and Slane, 2017; Uhl *et al.*, 2017). The lack of research in this area is particularly problematic given the potential number of websites hosting this material. Whilst definitively determining the number of platforms is almost an impossibility (given that the material is hosted across a range of different websites such as blogging pages, pornography websites, community forums, imageboards, and that websites are often shut down and resurface under alternative web addresses) it is not unfounded to assume that the number of websites operating is likely to run into the thousands at a minimum (Uhl *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the limited number of studies in comparison to the countless number of potential victims leaves society ashamedly uninformed about a type of abuse which could be impacting 10 per cent of the population (Henry *et al.*'s, 2019). Nonetheless, the research that does exist provides an excellent starting point in understanding the nature of these platforms.

Research indicates that women continue to be the primary targets for non-consensual image sharing and that those uploading and commenting on images are most likely to be men given that IBSA websites tend to display high levels of heteronormality, misogyny and the objectification of women (Henry and Flynn, 2019). It has also been highlighted that 'revenge', the most assumed motivation for sharing these images, is not always the primary motivating factor (see Langlois and Slane, 2017; Henry and Flynn, 2019; Franklin, 2014; Uhl *et al.*, 2017). For example, Franklin (2014) identifies that sexual gratification may be gained from the abusive context of these images, arguing that unlimited, and often free, access to mainstream pornography makes it unlikely that nudity is the only reason for seeking out these images. Instead, he suggests that the lack of intention for the images to be publicly seen is what attracts users to the websites because this is what distinguishes these images from mainstream pornography images.

Franklin's (2014) suggestion was confirmed by Henry and Flynn (2019) who conducted an ethnographic study of websites hosting IBSA content. They found a specific demand for non-consensual images online and argue that instead of revenge being the primary motivation, sexual gratification, social status, and peer networking played a much greater role in sharing

and viewing images. Similarly, Uhl *et al.* (2018) found comparable results in their examination of websites, finding that revenge may play a greater role on social media, email, and instant messaging platforms rather than specific IBSA websites or message board threads. Hall and Hearn (2018) further identify several motivations for sharing these images including, recognition, providing a service, trolling, and reminiscing.

Whilst research has done well to identify many of the motivations underpinning user engagement with these websites, examinations of user behaviour and culture is much less developed. This is mostly due to the need to initially understand the ‘what’ rather than the ‘why’. This does not mean that previous studies have not explored user culture and behaviour at all, but that literature-based approaches and larger sample sizes tend to limit the depth of analysis. For example, Hall and Hearn (2018) contextualise these platforms more broadly within the growing technological landscape, highlighting the advantages of engaging with communities online, including privacy, the construction of identities, and deception. Others have opted for examining a high volume and/or range of websites. Taking a more quantitative approach, Uhl *et al.* (2018) examine user comments across seven websites finding that posts containing a reason or ‘justification’ for image distribution tended to have a higher number of views. They also found sites to be generating revenue through charging removal fees or the use of advertising. Similarly, Henry and Flynn (2019) examined 77 websites finding that user motivations and culture tended to differ across platforms. They found that those websites hosting this content can be separated into two main categories: (1) public sites such as social media or revenge websites where participation centred around harassment and humiliation and (2) private sites such as imageboards and community forums which are more centred towards peer bonding and the building of self-esteem. These studies provide of most comprehensive set of findings yet giving valuable insight into online communities.

However, there is still further scope to explore the intricacies and nuances of user behaviour. To do this, a small sample size is useful to allow for a more thorough understanding of how users interact with images, each other, and the platform more generally. Only one previous study has taken opted to take a more in-depth approach. Langlois and Slane (2017) adopt a case study approach by analysing user interactions and the business approach for one website (myex.com). They found that both victims and perpetrators were subject to levels of shaming and abuse. Women were subject to threats of violence whilst men continuously attempted to assert moral authority over others, particularly through the use of homophobic or racist

comments. Langlois and Slane (2017) discuss these interactions in detail, contextualising them within the context reputational economies highlighting how the advertising models and technologies of this platform amounted to a business which was able to capitalise on negative reputations.

Similarly to Langlois and Slane (2017), the purpose of the research presented in this paper was to take a case study approach but with the aim of examining user behaviour, motivations and culture. Drawing across two platforms, it maintains the ability to undertake a more nuanced examination whilst also extending the knowledge beyond a singular platform. Whilst some of the findings presented in this paper confirm the results of previous studies, particularly with regards to recognising heterogeneity across sites, the findings contribute to the field in three ways. Firstly, the in-depth approach taken to analysis provides the reader with a detailed picture of behaviours and comments on these sites. Although still softened for publication, having a clear picture of just how abusive comments are allows for a better understanding of the harsh reality of these sites.

Secondly, research in this area has touched upon the pornography industry mainly through examining the sharing of IBSA material on pornography platforms (Henry and Flynn, 2019). However, there is a knowledge gap with regards to how the pornography industry is influencing the operation and use of platforms. With the pornography industry having a fundamental influence on how society views sex, sexual discourse, and gender scripts (Dines, 2010) it likely to influence other sexual domains within society. Website analysis was therefore theoretically underpinned by radical feminist work on pornography, which not only allowed for examination of gender discourse, misogyny, and objectification, but also uncovered the blurring of boundaries between IBSA and pornography. Whilst these images are not considered to be forms of pornography by academics and victims, this research suggests that images are being *used and marketed as pornography* creating a ‘pornification’ of image based sexual abuse.

Thirdly, whilst non-consensual image sharing is a significant issue in its own right, this research examines it within the broader context of online misogyny. Guest *et al.* (2021: 1338) defines misogynistic treatment as “content that discusses, advocates, incites or plans negative or harmful treatment of women. It includes expressing intent to take action against women, as well as expressing desires about how they should be treated”. In their annotated dataset to detect misogyny they identify a range of misogynistic treatment including threatening

language, misogynistic derogation, and perceptions of women being deserving of abuse. With many platforms now encompassing Web 2.0; platforms which allow user-generated content (Reddit, 4Chan, Facebook, Twitter), we are seeing a significant growth in misogynistic content online more broadly (Guest et al., 2021). This is becoming particularly evident in areas online which are considered part of the ‘manosphere’. This refers to a sphere of groups who share a common interest in men’s rights and often a hatred of women (Kostantinos et al., 2021). Many of the behaviors and interactions that have been identified on non-consensual image sharing platforms would be classed as misogynistic behavior (Langlois and Slane, 2017) and therefore it is useful to consider the connections between these sites and other forms of misogynistic content online. Establishing these connections allows consideration of how behaviour on non-consensual image sharing platforms is indicative of the broader misogynistic landscape online, ensuring that we consider how different forms of online abuse interact and reinforce misogynistic behaviour.

## **Methods**

In 2016 data was collected from two websites: myex.com and anon-IB. These specific websites were chosen for three reasons. Firstly, they were known to be problematic for UK victims. Secondly, myex.com is a website solely dedicated to non-consensual sharing of sexual images and whilst Anon-IB served as a message board for multiple topics, it also had a space clearly dedicated to this content. Using these platforms reduced some of the ambiguity in relation to whether images were in fact non-consensually shared. For example, IBSA images are uploaded onto pornography websites (Henry and Flynn, 2019) but identifying them amongst the websites legitimate pornographic material is difficult because sharing non-consensual images is not the purpose of the platform. For this reason, mainstream pornography websites were not examined. Lastly, these websites are ethically defined as public websites; that is, membership or registration is not required view content. Therefore, users should generally be aware that the websites were public rather than private and that their comments were accessible to internet users (Elm, 2009). Ethical approval was granted to download webpages containing cases of IBSA. This involved downloading the page in its entirety to observe the web page layout, images and accompanying captions, and user comments. This also ensured that data could be re-visited as there was a danger of these types of websites being taken down and the original sources of data being lost. As anticipated, the sites from which this data was collected have now been removed from circulation. Given both victims and website users were not able to

consent to the use of this content, the raw data was not observed by anyone other than the researcher and the data was destroyed upon publication of results.

Two different approaches to data collection were applied in accordance with the website formats to get the most representative sample. Images which were uploaded to myex.com were not ordered by date and therefore, it was impossible to tell which posts were the most recent. However, the posts were sequentially ordered by the date users commented; these were displayed in descending order. Therefore, systematic random sampling was applied; every fifth post and subsequent comments were collected starting with the home page working backwards. This ensured that the sample contained the most recent data and that cases were selected randomly reducing researcher bias (Bachman and Schutt, 2017). However, this website contained hundreds of posts which had received comments and to avoid obtaining an unnecessary amount of data, especially given that women do not want these images to be viewed, data was collected until a saturation point was reached; comments were observed as the data was being collected and once data collection ceased to add new new information data collection was stopped (Bachman and Schutt, 2017). This sample consisted of 72 cases.

The home page on AnonIB contained different categories of IBSA. For example, users could select from categories with specific sexual themes or locations of women. To avoid bias by narrowing the data to a particular theme the most general category was chosen (ex-girlfriends) to collect data from. This category hosted an amalgamation of all the different types of images making the results more generalizable for this website. Both the posts and comments on AnonIB were dated; this resulted in older posts being displayed amongst newer ones. For example, a post from 2014 may contain a comment in 2016 making the post appear higher up in the search results. Therefore, all of the posts which in which *the images* were uploaded in 2016 were collected. A total of 42 cases were obtained.

The collected posts were thematically coded using Nvivo to examine the key themes within user interactions. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain the gender of those actively using these platforms most of the users did appear to be heterosexual males, and therefore findings are based on this premise. This is not unfounded given that previous research has found that 90% of those posting on these kinds of websites were males (Hall and Hearn, 2018). Therefore, whilst it is not possible to say that all the users analysed within this sample are male, the analysis still provides a useful understanding of cultural norms and heteronormative misogyny

within these online communities. The following section present the research findings in relation to website aesthetics and structure, followed by an examination of user interactions, culture and potential motivations.

### **Website Presentation and Structure**

There is no doubt within the academic field that these images are not considered to be a form of pornography by researchers, organisations or, victims (Henry and Powell, 2016) and yet it was impossible to ignore how the presentation and structure of the websites had a striking similarity to mainstream pornography websites. Other than both websites hosting sexually explicit materials, the websites contained a substantial amount of pornography advertising including links to mainstream pornography videos, live sex chats, live sex camera feeds, video game advertisements which contain depictions of sexual intercourse, and Viagra advertisements. AnonIB, continuously ran a live sex camera feed at the bottom of its pages displaying women performing sexual acts on men without the user having to opt-in to view.

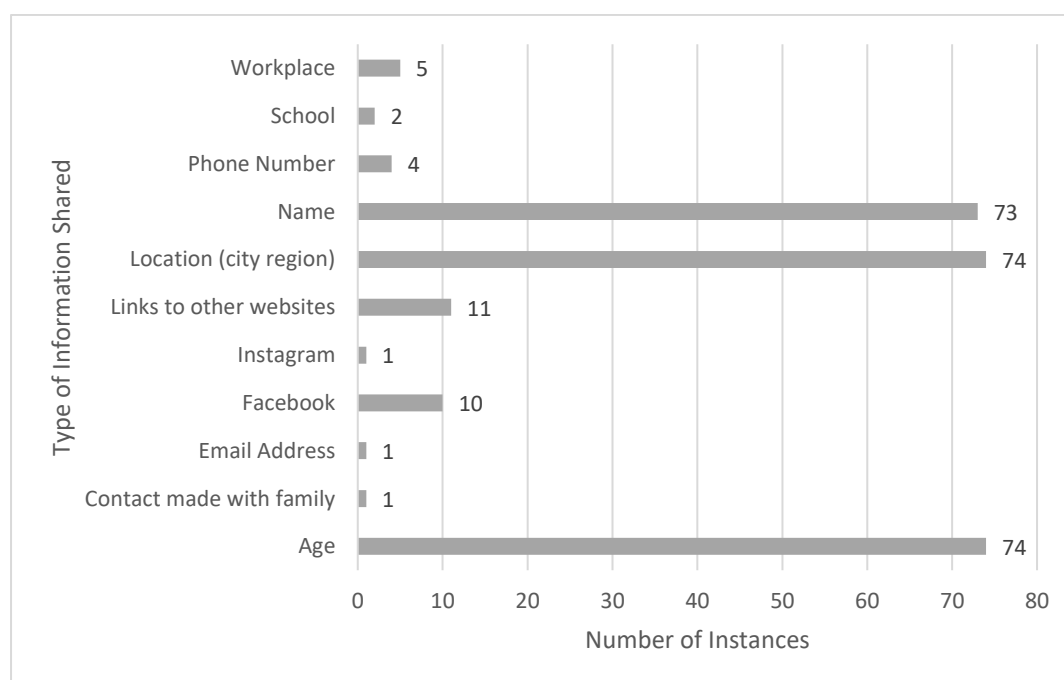
Both websites were overwhelmingly dominated with images of women which are displayed similarly to how women are often presented on pornography websites. On myex.com, each page featured the images of ten different women. Each of these posts contains a main image, thumbnails of other images users can view, a star rating system, and the number of views each woman has. This presentation is something which is consistently used on mainstream pornography websites; it allows users to browse snapshots of the material before committing to view it in its entirety, whilst rating systems allow users to determine how desirable the material is. Whilst AnonIB was not set out in this way, and was less visually sophisticated overall, it did still mimic pornography sites in other ways. For example, popular pornography websites (Redtube, Xhamster and Pornhub) offer users a large range of categories so that users can quickly and easily access pornography which contains particular types of sex and/or women. This categorisation is replicated on AnonIB which allows users to choose from several categories including types of images and/or actions, the women's locations, the women's race, and different fetishes. However, whilst both websites did adopt aspects of pornography culture, a closer analysis of user interactions suggests that the motivation for engaging with these websites, and the cultures among them, are more varied than pornographic consumption.



## Myex.com

On Myex.com, images of women were uploaded with many personal and identifying details. Table 1 indicates the types of information shared about the women and the number of cases this occurred in. Of the 74 cases, all the women had their age and location shared and 73 had their name identified (although whether these names are correct is impossible to ascertain). Links to social media accounts were also disseminated and if the images were available on other websites, commenters tended to provide these.

**Table 1: Type and Number of Identifying details on Myex.com**



All of the cases had received comments from the websites' users; comments largely focused upon the women's appearance and/or body shape as well as the sexual acts users would like to (or not like to) perform on the women. There were 171 comments which were 'complimentary' of the women's bodies (for example, "nice body" and "I'd fuck her"). A large proportion of these ( $n=150$ ) reduced women to their sexualised body parts, dehumanising them in the process. The most commonly used words were tits', 'pussy' 'asshole/arse', 'holes', boobs' and 'cunt'. Often, dehumanisation was taken a step further by explicitly associating women with non-human objects such as "nice pieces of fuck meat". On the other hand, there were 178 comments which were critical of the women's looks. Users often stated that they *would not* have sex with those pictured because they were "fat" and/or "ugly", and 137 of these comments

explicitly critiqued the women's body image. In many of these instances' women were associated with animals such as whales, pigs, cows and dogs, particularly if they were deemed overweight.

It is important to note that the term 'complimentary' has been used to draw a distinction between two types of abusive comments, those perceived by users to be complimentary and those which were critical. This does not suggest any of the comments were more abusive than others, however it is important to make this distinction because the perceived attractiveness of the women uncovers information about users' potential motivations. For example, comments which were 'complimentary' showed evidence that men were engaging with these images for sexual gratification in such a way which is not entirely distinct from viewing pornography. Comments which were critical of the women suggested that motivations for these users may be more complex. In these instances, the comments moved suggested attempts to establish identity, status, and masculinity. Comments often held a dual meaning in that the critical comments were not just a way to shame and critique women, but also the men who shared the images of, and associated with, 'unattractive' women. Take for example the comment 'Are you insane? Blind? or just REALLY hard up... DAMN that's just wrong'.

User status was also judged on how genuine the images were, in terms of ownership, whether the motivation for sharing the image was underpinned by revenge, and the quality of the images in terms of sexual arousal. If the images are deemed to be disingenuous or of poor quality, the perpetrator also faced criticism. Comments included 'No name? ... How is this revenge if you don't post her name?', 'poor photoshopping' and 'not real sexy... no thanks [the image wasn't sexually explicit enough]'. However, even in instances where women were seen to be attractive there were a mix of comments with some praising the user who posted the images and others still making direct attempts to undermine men's masculinity. For example, if a woman's images were deemed to have been shared in revenge for infidelity, the user who posted the images was often not deemed man enough to keep hold of an attractive woman. Comments included things like 'Much respect... More pics!!' and 'you weren't man enough to keep her'

Comments which detailed sexual acts the users would like to perform on the women were common ( $n=130$ ) with comments including descriptions of penetration and ejaculation ('unloading') on the women's faces and bodies. Twenty-seven comments contained phrases which overtly suggested aggression and violence, both sexual and non-sexual. Whilst most of

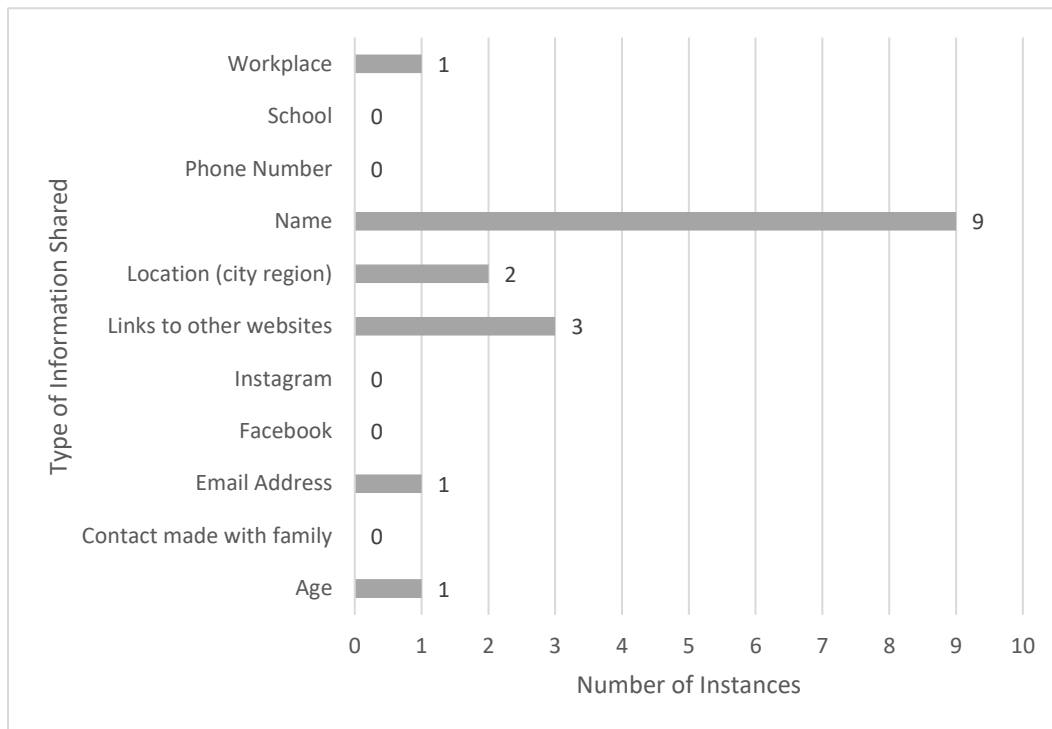
the comments on this platform would be considered misogynistic and violent there were several comments which overtly indicated force and/or violence. The use of the term ‘pounding’ was particularly common. There were also explicit references to raping the women (including gang rape), cracking their ribs, and ‘putting bullets’ in women’s heads.

Motivations for posting on this website also seemed to be underpinned by the purpose of shaming, or more specifically ‘slut shaming’. Out of the 74 cases, 72 had a commentary on either why the image was being uploaded or providing information on the user’s relationship or experiences with the women. Women were rendered ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’ for sending nude images to users, cheating, lying and supposedly spreading sexual transmitted diseases. These women needed to be ‘exposed’.

### **Anon-IB**

The data collected from Anon-IB contained 42 cases and demonstrated lower levels of victim identification. For example, for myex.com almost 100 per cent of cases contained some kind of personal detail of the victim, whilst less than 50 per cent of cases contained an identifying detail on Anon-IB. Although the name of the women remained the most common identifying feature, only 9 of the cases included the victim’s name. The women’s locations and ages were also much less likely to be disclosed.

**Table 2: Type and Number of Identifying Details on AnonIB**



Only half of the cases (22 out of 42) had received comments, indicating that users gravitated towards women which they found attractive, as opposed to myex.com where users spent considerable time criticising women they did not find attractive. In doing so, the levels of criticism and aggression on this website are significantly lower. Of the 42 cases, only one negative comment about body image was found and 49 comments indicated that users found the women attractive. Furthermore, the negative comment did not reflect the type of comments on myex.com, with the user displaying a dislike of the woman's breast implants, rather than commenting on her body size or being explicitly dehumanising. Comments which were 'complimentary' did resemble those found on myex.com, however the number of comments which explicitly reduced women to their body parts was much less common with a total of 22 comments explicitly referring to or requesting images of sexual body parts. The remaining comments were typically 'would love to see more', 'she's hot' and 'she's sexy'. Whilst the focus on women's bodies does result in dehumanisation of the women more broadly, there was only one case which had a clear dehumanisation element, with one woman referred to as 'a trophy'. Furthermore, unlike myex.com, none of the cases involved tensions, aggression, or criticism of other website users.

Of the 22 cases which received comments, there were 35 comments relating to trading amongst users, with three methods being common. (1) Users initially use the website to find others who are wanting to trade. In these instances, a user will post an image asking if others would like to view more images and if another user is interested, they will exchange contact details and change a more private communication platform (e.g. KIK). (2) Users ask others to trade but *do not* post any images for example a user may post, 'Hello! I'm looking to trade 'real' pictures and videos of your ex... [user's email]'. (3) Users will trade on the website itself; in these instances, there is not usually a 'trading agreement' but threads will often contain images of multiple different women as users show their appreciation of other users' willingness to share through reciprocation, consequently resulting in a more casual form of trading.

When interactions did not involve trading, or trading took place publicly, users gained social status by adhering to image requests. Users often asked for images of particular body parts and/or pictures of the woman engaging in sexual acts. For example, in one case, a user uploads images of his claimed current girlfriend asking users 'what do you think?'. In doing so, he actively seeks approval and acceptance from other users for his ability to 'have' an attractive woman and obtain images of her. Once other users become interested, they ask for more images; 'Love to see her asshole'. The perpetrator fulfils these requests and in doing so he gains respect and status from other users; 'literally couldn't ask for anything more in a girlfriend. And the fact she's let you take pictures like that is even better, you are one lucky guy! She's so hot. Keep it coming'. This was an extremely common practice on the website with a total of 75 comments involving the goading of users to upload more images; numerically the most common coded theme found within these cases.

In this data set there was only one comment from a user detailing an act he would like to perform on a woman and another revealing he wanted to hack the victims iCloud. There were no explicit threats of rape or violence which resembled those seen on myex.com. However, there was some evidence of overt shaming within the captions posted alongside the images. For example, users often made clear that the images were of their ex-partners. There were also three instances in which the women were referred to as 'sluts'. There was only one comment which clearly indicated the posting of an image with the motivation of revenge; captions were more likely to refer to the user seeking to trade or wanting to share images as part of the community practice. For example, one user states 'I thought I might share'.

Data from myex.com and AnonIB present several important observations. Firstly, that there are clear distinctions between different platforms, and this can help to inform us about *potential* user motivations. Secondly, there is an increasing pornification of this material which is serving to reinforce and legitimise forms of abuse. Lastly, these websites resemble the growing number of misogynistic platforms online highlighting the need for criminology to increasingly engage with the digital if we are to understand current and future directions of abuse. Each of these findings is discussed below.

### **Platform Heterogeneity**

The data confirmed the importance of avoiding the assumption that platforms are homogenous. Findings suggest users may be seeking out particular platforms depending on motivations. Whilst motivations cannot be definitively identified without speaking with users, it is possible to draw *potential* motivations from the way that users comment and engage with the platform (Uhl *et al*, 2018). Furthermore, for users who do publicly engage with the platforms, they somewhat agree to contribute to the sites purpose and culture, and thus an examination of common cultural norms can provide an insight into potential motivations also.

User interactions on myex.com were significantly more hostile than those on AnonIB, and user motivations seemed to mostly revolve around revenge, shaming, and sexual gratification. Motivations for revenge and shaming were evidenced through almost every case containing the name and city of residence of the victim. Users are likely to know that releasing the identity of the victim increases the level of harm by making them more identifiable and therefore contactable (Huber, 2022; see also Citron and Franks, 2014; Franklin, 2014), which is confirmed by comments from users showing dissatisfaction when this information is not released. This suggests that the shaming and revenge does constitute an important aspect for users, which is again confirmed by user complaints when images are lacking quality or nudity leading to accusations that the original poster is not seeking enough revenge.

Distinctions between attractive and non-attractive women also played a much more prominent role on myex.com. Although users were drawn to women they found attractive on both sites, on myex.com users displayed a clear distain of women deemed unattractive. Users on AnonIB seemed much more likely to simply ignore images of women they did not find suggesting that the importance of attractiveness on myex.com is underpinned by the website culture of using

women's attractiveness to evidence, or undermine, masculinity. Itzin (1993) argues that men validate their masculinity by showing their ability to have sex with the most feminine women and thus, attractive females. This is reflected on the website with the sharing of images being used as a mechanism to demonstrate both sexual prowess and control via their willingness to shame women. Those men who are willing to humiliate 'the most attractive' women to the highest degree are met with high levels of praise within the community. Those users who do not obtain images of attractive women, fail to obtain more degrading images, or refuse to increase the levels of shame through identity disclosure, are not seen to display the right 'standard' of masculinity and are condemned within the online community.

Data from AnonIB demonstrated a very different user engagement and culture compared to myex.com. Anon-IB users placed much less importance on the identification of those in the images suggesting that the element of shaming through 'naming and shaming' was not a primary motivation for users. This is supported by the fact that users tended to gravitate and comment on images of women whom they found attractive rather than using the platform to critique and demonstrate disapproval of women they did not find attractive. This suggests that, motivations may be more strongly underpinned by sexual gratification although the shaming element is not entirely withdrawn given the nature of the site. Nonetheless, this would contribute to explaining why the lower levels of overt dehumanisation on this website and why why slut-shaming language was not reinforced or goaded further by other users. It also became clear that user interactions were centred around trading images to obtain more private and intimate material. This demonstrates the creation of a market in which these images are treated as commodities and forms of currency, thus indicating support for the suggestion that motivations of image sharing can be underpinned by a sexual interest in these particular images (Franklin's, 2014).

User attempts to gain status was also evident on AnonIB, although, again, interactions were different from those taking place on myex.com. On this website there was no evidence (in this sample) of users actively seeking to undermine the masculinity of other users. Furthermore, status was not gained through 'naming and shaming' the most attractive women but seemed to be gained through being able to access and offer sexual content sought after within the community. In both trading and non-trading situations Stoltenberg's (2004:402) 'eroticism of owning' concept is useful to consider. He argues that men grow up in a society in which pornography produces ideologies that 'real' men can take ownership of women, exert

dominance, and establish gender identity. In cases of trading, men take pride in their ownership of the images and the women who are contained in them, and it is this ownership which is perceived by users as providing a right to trade these images. In non-trading cases we see men demonstrating their ‘realness/authenticity’ through the ability to fulfil image requests which is exacerbated by the goading of other users to post more images. This suggests that whilst users are likely to be engaging with the website to obtain these particular types of images, regular users may be *continuing to engage* because of the online culture and socialisation which is taking place.

It is important to note that whilst some motivations seemed to be more prominent than others across the different websites, to some extent all of the motivations discussed existed across both the sites. Therefore, the argument is not to say that motivations cannot overlap or be multiple but that some motivations seem to take precedence over others, and this may be dictating which sites users engage with. It is likely that there is a ‘continuum of motivations’ operating across the broad spectrum of platforms and that each platform lends itself to accommodate different motivations. It would be useful if future research sought to identify whether users migrated across platforms. This would help to determine user commitment to platforms as well as variances in motivations amongst individual users.

### **The pornification of Non-consensual Image Sharing**

On a visual and cultural level, the data suggests that non-consensual image sharing has become pornified. Although there are some differences in how this occurs, the data generally suggests that these platforms actively seek to market these images as a form of entertainment. The structure and layout of both these websites mimic (although less refined) approaches taken by mainstream pornography websites. The use of sexual advertising on both sites, and links to other mainstream pornography websites, leaves the abusive images surrounded and buried within a wider pornography culture. On first look, if you were to remove the titles of the webpages and user comments, it would be reasonable to assume that these sites operated as amateur pornography platforms. That is not to say that users do not acknowledge the lack of consent, because they do, but it implies that non-consensual image sharing is comparable with mainstream pornography and denies the additional harms that are caused by non-consensual distribution. Furthermore, the ability for users to pick between types of images and women (on



AnonIB) actively encourages users to navigate and use the websites as a source of pornography not only undermining the abuse but encouraging the fetishizations of these images.

The encouragement of pornography culture on these websites is also visually reinforced by the attempted migration of users from image-based sexual abuse platforms to pornography platforms. In their examination of myex.com. Uhl *et al.*, (2017) identify the how the pornography industry use advertising to increase profitability, moving users from free pornography websites to a paying one. This is often done by publishing hyperlinks on the free website to redirect traffic. Uhl *et al.*, (2017) found persistent links to pornography websites in myex.com in a bid to re-direct website traffic. Thus, even if users are somehow not consciously aware of the pornification of these websites, it is difficult to ignore the association of these images with pornography with links taking users directly to the content. Moving people seamlessly from one sexualised platform to another is only likely to strengthen association between the two types of content, further neutralising the reality of image-based abuse. This fundamentally serves the interests of IBSA and pornography hosts who profit monetarily from this relationship as IBSA hosts earn advertising revenue and pornography sites obtain additional traffic.

Beyond website aesthetics and navigation, user comments and behaviour across both platforms suggest that users are engaging with tIBSA material in ways which resemble the misogyny depicted in mainstream pornography. Feminist literature surrounding pornography has consistently identified the depiction of women being deserving of violent and sexual abuse (Dines, 2010; Funk, 2004). For example, Funk (2004) and Assister and Carol (1993) identify how pornography is not about mutual respect, but instead placing men at the centre, and depicting women as deserving or liking abuse, particularly if they are seen to display sexual freedom. On myex.com this is overtly seen in the consistent reference to women as ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’, with this being used as justification for users’ sexual and violent abuse. It was also common for men to opt for using commentaries of anal sex and bodily ejaculation which have been identified by Dines (2010) as some of the most degrading sex acts for women often seen in mainstream pornography. She argues that the ejaculation onto a woman’s body is a signature that the woman is used goods and in doing so, she becomes owned by the male, whilst anal sex is seen to represent the complete subordination of the woman (Dines, 2010). It is not surprising, then, that when men feel women are deserving of abuse, they would choose to envisage the most symbolically abusive forms of sexual contact that the pornography industry has

normalised.

Furthermore, the objectification and dehumanisation of women found on these websites mirrors the types of objectification feminists identified in mainstream pornography in the 1980s. Feminists consistently critiqued the pornography sector for reducing women to sexual body parts and defining them by their ability to cause erections (Dines, 2010; Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988). For example, Dines (2010) highlights the common use of the terms ‘cock’, ‘pussy’, ‘tiny’, ‘little’, ‘tight’ and ‘holes’ as common language and others highlight the use of such language to dehumanise, hypersexualise, and subordinate women (Jensen, 2007). Feminists also raised concerns that definitions of attractiveness in the pornography industry are consistently being reinforced within popular culture, with slim women often being the definition of attractiveness and fat women only appealing to those with a fetish (Russell, 1993; Whisnant, 2004). Examination of the websites clearly demonstrated an overt willingness of users to employ this kind of derogatory, misogynistic, objectifying, and dehumanising language to abuse and judge women. In doing so, we find typical pornographic language and culture permeating user’s reactions to these images.

The practice of trading on AnonIB also presents a particularly sinister trajectory. It demonstrates the existence of an overt rape culture with these images becoming particularly attractive *because* they have been shared non-consensually. This means that we have reached a point in which non-consent is not something that is just overtly sexualised in the pornography industry (Dines; 2010; Funk, 2004; Renzetti *et al.*, 2011; Russell, 1993; Wyre, 1993) but has become a normalised culture in corners of cyberspace where people actively seek out non-consensual images of women. This is also problematic because it causes the blurring of lines between non-consensually shared images and pornography as the images become a pornographic alternative for users. Russell (1993) and Wyre (1993) discuss how being aroused by particular images or contexts can be learnt; the more someone views particular images and associates them with orgasm the more likely they are to continue watching the material. This they argue, is how some men eventually become aroused by stronger material which humiliates, degrades and is violent towards women. If this is the case, it is important to consider how continued engagement with these websites reinforce the relationship between IBSA and arousal.

These websites present a clear example that rape culture is no longer something that remains

somewhat concealed in society, something people know exists but pretend to not partake in. Nor is it justified by being labelled as pornographic ‘fantasy’ (Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988). It is now something which is becoming ever more overt and actively sought. Consequently, we have now entered into an era in which these images have become a niche pornography market, causing the distinction between IBSA images and pornography to become blurred.

### **The Broader Misogynistic Landscape**

Evidence suggests that the scale of IBSA is significant issue which has the potential for continued rapid growth. For example, Henry *et al's* (2019) research which surveyed 4,122 Australians found that one in ten Australian respondents had experienced a nude or sexual image of themselves being distributed to others without their consent. Robinson also (2022) suggests that our knowledge of scale, prevalence, and experience is likely to be the “tip of a very big iceberg” as reports to the Revenge Porn Helpline continue to grow year on year, with around 19,000 victims contacting the helpline between 2018 and 2022 (Channel 4 News, 2022). Yet, it is not just the number of victims which warrants an increase in research in this area, it is the fact that fact that non-consensual image sharing is sits within, and exemplifies, a growing trend in misogyny and abuse against women online.

Highlighting women’s experiences of abuse online, Filipovic (2007) discusses the abuse faced by women who support feminist agendas. Filipovic became a topic on a discussion board facing doxxing and threats of violence after being identified as a ‘feminazi’. Her efforts to approach moderators was initially somewhat successful, halting continuance of discussion. However once images of her in a bathing suit were released as part of a ‘most appealing women’ thread moderators refused to intervene. Whilst this image was released within a broader campaign of abuse because of Filipovic’s feminist stance, it demonstrates that the use of non-consensual image sharing is occurring in broader misogynistic contexts even when abuse was not initially intended to include sexualized content. Arguably, it is also not coincidence that moderator’s refusal to intervene occurred when online conversations took a sexualized turn. Refusal to take down this kind of content is not new. Hunter Moore was notorious for refusing to take down images of women who made requests for image removal on isanyoneup.com (Lee, 2012a). Non-consensual image sharing is therefore not only being encouraged in specific online spaces but is being condoned on non-IBSA websites through moderators refusal to remove content

from misogynistic platforms.

Similarly, in 2014 we saw ‘#Gamergate’ in which a Zoe Quinn, a female game designer, became the center of a hateful campaign to undermine women’s work and harass them within the gaming community. A blog written by her ex-partner, detailing their breakup, suggested that Quinn’s success in the gaming industry was due to intimate relationships she was having with journalists who supported her work (Massanari, 2015). Whilst #Gamergate was originally associated with support for Quinn, trying to highlight the lack of ethics in the gaming industry, #Gamergate became targeted by harassers, who pursued Quinn and other supporters with rape and death threats (Massanari, 2015). In the same year we also had saw ‘#Thefapping’ where several celebrities had private intimate images posted on 4chan as a result of iCloud hacks. Even after the images were deleted from the 4Chan platform, they continued to circulate on the web including on Reddit (Massanari, 2015). Similarly to many other platforms where women are abused and images are released, discussion on the sites was mostly joyful with very little concern for the ethical and abusive nature of the sharing and viewing of these images (Massanari, 2015).

We have also seen the emergence of online communities whose sole purpose revolves around misogyny and hatred of women. Whilst there have been multiple groups which are seen to take an anti-feminist stance including Men’s Right Activists, Pick up Artists, and Men Going Their Own Way (Ribeiro et al, 2020), the group seen to hold the most extreme form of anti-feminist ideology are the community of Incels (involuntary celibates). Within this community, men believe that are oppressed by women in society and that some men are forced to be involuntarily celibate because of women’s expectations and selective behaviors with regards to mating. These communities believe that women’s power in society strips less attractive men of their mating opportunities. (Kostantinos et al., 2021). On these platforms it is common for violence to be discussed in the form of killing, physically abusing, and raping women (O’Malley *et al*, 2020)

What the above instances and communities tell us is that regardless of whether the non-consensual sharing of sexual images takes center stage, women are being routinely harassed, abused, threatened, and targeted online. The misogyny online bears a striking resemblance to the comments and attitudes directed at women on non-consensual image sharing platforms. What links these together, more broadly, is what Jane (2012: 2) terms ‘e-bile’ which she

identifies as “the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse”. Jane (2012) highlights that e-bile is no longer restricted to dark corners of the web, but instead operates freely in all areas of cyberspace. E-bile includes women being accused of unintelligence or being ugly. It includes women being threatened with rape and sexual violence. It includes women being labelled as ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’. As this article highlights, whilst all these behaviors can be found on platforms which are dedicated to the sharing of non-consensual images, these behaviors are certainly not unique to these spaces. Non-consensual image sharing is only one part of a wider misogynistic culture which is increasingly seeping into, and poisoning, a wide range of online spaces and communities.

With clear commonalities amongst these platforms, it is useful to consider how misogyny is reinforced and maintained online more generally. Whilst each platform or community will have its own motivations and culture, male peer support theory can help to understand how sexual abuse becomes normalized and legitimized online. Originally used to identify positive relations, peer support theories argued that people who had family and friends able to offer psychological and material support were much healthier people than those who did not (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2013). Taking this concept and using it to understand the negative behaviors that can result from male peer networks, Dekeseredy and Schwartz (2013) argued that societal culture conditions men into expecting particular rights as men, including domination and success in sexual relationships. When these rights become threatened, men often seek advice and support from male friends. Seeking support from within masculinized cultures, where men discuss success stories with females and control over others, causes men to perceive their own experiences as conflicting with their rights as men. This is more likely to legitimize forms of physical, psychological and sexual abuse of women. The authors also argued that male peer groups will often support and suggest that men should not tolerate women challenging authority, with forms of abuse and violence being an encouraged response (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2013). Dekeseredy and Schwartz later expanded on this theory to include the absence of deterrence, identifying how the lack of punishment or negative consequences for engaging in violence against women can contribute to perpetration. (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2013). This is particularly the case when friends condone or overlook forms of abuse, rather than calling men out, alongside the knowledge that they are unlikely to be arrested for such behavior (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2013).

Whilst this theoretical approach aimed to understand forms of abuse against women in the offline context, these arguments remain relevant online and share commonalities with the way that digital (and cyber) criminologists try to make sense of online space. For example, Powell et al. (2018) discusses the concept of the ‘digital society’ in trying to understand how technology is utilized to cause harm in society. One of the factors discussed by Powell et al., (2021) is ‘echo’ chambers. In doing so, they expand on Dekeseredy and Schwartz (2013) peer support theory by placing it within an online context. They argue that people not only tend to engage with like-minded people online, but that the plurality of viewpoints in online space allows people choose more freely which discourses they are exposed to, easily shutting out alternative viewpoints in the process. Otherwise known as ‘filter bubbles’. Consequently, perceptions and opinions can become more vigorously reinforced within groups causing opinions to become extreme. Franca (2018) and Suler (2004) also identify anonymity and empowerment as a key characteristic of online space. Suler argues that people feel they can behave differently online, which is inevitably aided by the fact that the online world affords people much more anonymity compared to the offline world. This anonymity significantly reduces the chances of negative consequences, and makes all crimes, including abuse against women fundamentally less risky. As suggested by Dekeseredy, this lack of deterrence combined with the echo chambers of peer support creates an environment in which online abuse and misogyny against women can flourish. Therefore, the bringing together of theoretical ideas surrounding the reinforcement of misogynistic culture offline with ideas seeking to explain the uniqueness of the online environment can therefore help us to provide a general understanding of how misogynistic culture is spreading online.

### **Future Directions**

Given the rapid rate in which online environments have changed over time, the data collected in 2016, and indeed work published in this area is likely to be missing the most recent developments online. Therefore, it is difficult to say how these communities and cultures have changed in the last three without the publication of more recent data. However, the Revenge Porn Helpline’s (2021) report identifies emerging trends online. For example, they identify people they term ‘collectors’ who seek to create collections of these images. They also identify increasing efforts to create secrecy around these communities with the expanding use of paywalls. Whilst this is not surprising given the criminalisation of IBSA in 2015 as well as the increasing attention given to the issue, it means this type of content is becoming increasingly

protected and harder to uncover. From research perspective this presents an upcoming challenge with ethical approval for site examination often being granted on the premise that content is within the public domain. Content which sits behind a paywall becomes 'private' requiring a more complex consideration of ethical issues particularly around participant consent (Elm, 2009). Therefore, although the sites which from this data is drawn are no longer operational, it provides some vital foundational knowledge; it is likely to be one of the very few studies in which data will have been collected with few access and ethical restrictions limiting data collection and knowledge production produced from website examination alone.

## **Conclusion**

The research presented in this article sought to examine the nature of two websites which host sexual images of women shared without consent. This included, website structure, user interactions, user motivations, and online culture. Findings suggest that whilst both websites actively hosted non-consensually shared images the websites were not homogenous. Furthermore, whilst most would argue that these images are not forms of pornography, the marketisation and use of these images as forms of pornography cannot be ignored. With thousands of images uploaded to these platforms, responding to this issue is of vital importance. Failure to do so, not only allows the continuation of shaming, harm, degradation, and abuse of women but also runs the risk of IBSA continuing to develop into a black market of entertainment and pornography.

These sites also bring a much broader issues to the fore, although significant traction has been achieved in addressing and raising awareness of sexism and sexual violence online in recent years, online misogyny continues to grow, with many of the behaviors and interactions on IBSA not being entirely unique to these spaces. The bringing together of theoretical ideas which help to unpick forms of misogyny as well as perspectives aimed at understanding the distinctiveness of the online environment can help uncover of how misogynistic culture is spreading online. This article brings together concepts within feminist theory, peer support theory, and digital criminology to provide insight into culture on image based sexual abuse platforms and how this culture intersects across the wider online misogynistic sphere. With the development of technology, the harms we see today will become the 'norm' or 'unsurprising' and new types of abuse will begin to emerge. Therefore, it is important that we bring together theorizations surrounding misogynistic culture and the uniqueness of the online environment

if criminology is to stand a chance at fully understanding current, and future, forms of abuse against women.



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