The rhythms of shame in digital sexual assault: Rhythmic resistance and the repeated assault

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Abstract
The non-consensual distribution of intimate images is a highly mediated kind of sexual violence. This article shows how data persistence and shareability constitute victim experiences of digital sexual assault as ‘repeated assaults’; as recurring instances of exposure and shaming facilitated by mediated rhythms and circulation. I also show how the participants of this study, young women victimised by digital assault, managed to create stability and resist the rhythms of their assault by modifying their social media presence and politicising their experiences.

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Introduction
Digital sexual assault (DSA) is the practice of sharing intimate and sexualised images of a person online without their consent. The research project presented here has involved five young women in a long-term participatory research experiment focussed on their experiences of digital assault. In this context, they call themselves Amalie, Mathilde, Karen, Leonora and Anne-Mette, and they all have different stories to tell. Anne-Mette has been a victim of sextortion, with images taken of her without her knowledge being used to blackmail her. Karen was in an abusive relationship that resulted in revenge porn. Leonora was filmed during a sexual act that she was too drunk to remember and consent to. Mathilde had her private information shared online with intimate images. Amalie also had information shared, along with images that were originally meant to document weight loss.

Despite the differences in their stories, there seem to be two shared characteristics. First, the circulated images are identifiable because they can be associated with the victims’ names, social media profiles or other kinds of information, making it possible to find and contact them. Second, the images are shareable: either they are being circulated, or there is a credible threat that they will be. These two characteristics are the basis of the analytical and theoretical approaches that I adopt in this article.

First, I look at shame and its connection to identity and exposure. I show how digital exposure causes moments of shame and how these recurring instances of shaming cause an underlying shame anxiety and a potential for shame.
These instances reveal that DSA experiences move in rhythms characterised by repeated exposure and shaming. Second, I show how these rhythms of shame and exposure changed over time, and how the participants were able to act in order to cause rhythmic disruption and sometimes even turn shame into anger and claim political agency. Shame and its rhythms are important components of DSA experiences because of the mediated conditions of exposure and repeatability, and they are some of the components that the participants kept returning to. In this way, an analysis looking into such experiences offers a significant contribution to our knowledge of victim experiences of DSA.

In short, this article presents an analytical framework that combines theories on shame and rhythm in the context of digital exposure, circulation and data persistence. But more importantly, it offers valuable insights into the mediated experiences of DSA victims by involving five women in the research process and allowing them to share and construct their stories. While I know that the research project was a helpful process for the participants, I also hope that these insights can find their relevance in other projects — academic as well as pedagogical or political — that seek to respectfully understand and improve the situations with which DSA victims have to cope.

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**Theory: Digital sexual assault, shame and rhythms**

In academic, educational, legal and political contexts, stories of DSA have been circulating in recent years. Digital sexual assault has been described within the realm of gendered violence (Bates, 2017; McGlynn, *et al.*, 2017; Uhl, *et al.*, 2018), as a legal issue in a new mediated society (Henry and Powell, 2016), and often as a part of digital youth cultures (Döring, 2014; Rasmussen and Sondergaard, 2020; Ringrose, *et al.*, 2013; Thorhauge and Bonitz, 2020). While these contributions add immensely to the understanding of digital sexuality and assault, there are certain weaknesses in the field, which I wish to address in this article. First, however, it is relevant to present my definition and understanding of DSA within the context of this research project.

Digital sexual assault is a translation of the Danish term ‘digitale sexkrænkelser’, which is generally used by politicians, legal practitioners, activists and the press. It is also the term preferred by the participants of this research project. In the international literature, however, the same practices are often referred to as image-based sexual abuse (Maddocks, 2018; McGlynn, *et al.*, 2017).

Many attempts to find a suitable terminology for these assaulting practices try to group them into subcategories (McGlynn, *et al.*, 2017), or describe image sharing as one out of many kinds of technology-facilitated sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2016). Powell, *et al.* (2019) define five different categories of image-based sexual abuse (relationship retribution, sextortion, voyeurism, sexploitation and sexual assault), which categorise such assaults based on the aggressors’ acts and motives. In doing so, they give valuable insights into the diverse range of practices described as digital assault; but by asking what was done and why, they also take the perspective of the aggressors, making the experiences of victims almost invisible in their framework.

Generally, there seems to be a growing consensus among youth and media scholars that victims’ perspectives on digital sexual assault have already been addressed, and that the focus should instead be directed towards broader sharing practices (Thorhauge, *et al.*, 2020), bystanders and offenders (Fransson, *et al.*, 2019; Harder, *et al.*, 2019). While I agree that these foci are important, I will also argue that in fact very few (if any) studies to this day take their point of departure in victims’ voices when discussing digital assault in a mediated reality. Further, the studies that do address victim perspectives, for instance in relation to psychological trauma (Bates, 2017) or gendered violence (Mann, 2018), seem to focus on the immediate traumatic reactions and thereby fail to represent the ways in which DSA experiences change over time, are repeated and sometimes fade.

To add to this field of research into digital sexual violence, I combine three theoretical frameworks. First, I suggest four defining categories of DSA that are prevalent when working with victims’ perspectives. Second, I draw on theories of shame to frame victim experiences of exposure and objectification. Finally, I introduce rhythmanalysis as a framework that broadens the analysis of shame to reveal modulations and repetitions in shame experiences. All three theoretical frameworks further relate to the digital context that DSA and its victims exist in. Hence, the analysis contributes to the existing research by foregrounding mediated victim experiences, not just at the moment of tragedy, but as contextual and continuously lived realities.

**Definition and types of DSA**
Because the aggressors, at least initially, are the acting agents of the assault, a definition of DSA that takes a victim perspective cannot be based on what was done. Instead, I base my categorisation of types of DSA on non-consensual factors: where and how did the victims feel that their boundaries had been overstepped? By emphasising non-consensual acts, the framework makes it clear exactly which parts of an event turn it into a sexual assault [1].

Figure 1: Different categories of DSA.

Figure 1 shows four different categories of DSA. They are all characterised by the fact that they were distributed without consent, while 2 and 4 include situations in which the image production was also non-consensual, and 3 and 4
include situations in which the sexual situation was also non-consensual. The figure shows examples of practices that fall under each category.

While all the categories include non-consensual sexualisation on the level of distribution and exposure, ‘non-consensual sexualisation’ here refers to instances where the victim experiences a sexualisation that is somehow detached from the original image production. This is why upskirting (2), for example, does not fall under this category; because the sexualisation occurs when the image is taken, making it a case of primarily non-consensual production. In contrast, the examples categorised under non-consensual sexualisation (3) cover cases where the production was consensual (it could be that the victim uploaded a beach picture to social media), but the image was later used in a sexual context (for instance being shared on an escort or revenge porn site). Furthermore, the category that includes both non-consensual production and sexualisation (4) consists of cases where the sexual acts would have been perceived as assaults even without the image production, but in which the image production adds to the assault (for instance when rape is filmed and shared). In addition, all the cases of DSA analysed here have resulted in instances of the victims being recognised and harassed. These confrontations are particularly important in relation to shame, as I will discuss below.

**Shame and the digital subject**

There is something intriguing about drawing the connection between shame and digital media, especially since several scholars have described shame as being related to exposure and seeing yourself and being seen. Sartre (1992) defines shame as the feeling of being seen and seeing yourself through the look of the other; Ahmed (2014) claims that “to be witnessed in one’s failure is to be ashamed” [2]; and Probyn suggests that shame involves seeing oneself differently (Probyn, et al., 2019). In all these approaches, shame is part of a relation between identity (subjectivity) and exposure (objectification).

In an earlier article (Uldbjerg, 2020), I used the concept of ‘the look’ as presented by Sartre to show that shame is central to digital assault experiences. I introduced the concept of ‘the potential onlooker’ to reflect the fact that DSA victims do not necessarily know who might have seen their images, which means that anyone they meet on and off digital media can potentially be the holder of a shaming look. However, approaching shame through the concept of the look and the onlooker produces a somewhat static account of DSA experiences. The look is a moment of exposure, a sudden turning point for the self, well defined in time and space, but — as I will explore in this article — DSA experiences change over time and exposure involves not only separate instances but a recurring pattern of living with the consequences of digital assault.

Change is embedded in some approaches to shame. Probyn (Probyn, et al., 2019) explains that shame is productive, in the sense that it can undo the self and produce new subjectivities. She writes:

> When one feels shame it is a profound intra-subjective moment that has the capacity to undo something of the person [...] Feeling shame produces a new sense of self even if it is only momentary; it produces a profound reflection of the self. [3]

The idea of changing identities calls into question the way shame shapes the subject over time. What happens when the potential onlooker, and thereby the shaming look, is constantly present in the mediated reality of DSA victims? In extension thereof, what does it mean that the subject in question is a digitally mediated subject?

Karppi (2018), drawing on Deleuze’s concept of the ‘dividual’, describes how subjects in mediated reality become “doubles who exist simultaneously in different databases, information banks, and other technomaterial assemblages” [4]. One’s online presence, in this sense, becomes a part of the self that is both detached from off-line reality and intertwined with it in the sense that it plays a role in constituting the self. This mediated self, as Karppi also notes, cannot be controlled or deleted: even when we disconnect from social or digital media, our data persists. In concrete terms, victims of DSA cannot escape the assaulting images because they do not just persist — they persist as parts of the bodily and technological assemblage that make up who these victims are. There simply is no ‘turning it off’.

It is also relevant to note that mediated selves are also relational or networked selves (Papacharissi, 2012). The ways that the self can be performed online depend on others perceiving and accepting the performance of the self. Papacharissi (2012) argues that the upholding of a digital self depends on its shareability (its circulation) and not just its existence as data. In this way, what is being shared is crucial to defining the mediated self.
With data persistence and shareability being central concepts in understanding the mediated self, the circulation of DSA images is clearly a profound violation of a person’s identity. This is how digital exposure becomes shameful in the sense that shame is an undoing of the self, and it is the reason why disrupting rhythms of shame is a kind of identity work that has the potential to shift hegemonic victim positions. However, these shifts happen over time and through repeated instances of exposure and resistance. It is these perspectives on time and repetition that rhythmanalysis can help us understand.

**Rhythm, media and resistance**

According to Lefebvre (1992), rhythmanalysis involves attempting to identify and separate the various rhythms that make up a situation or a phenomenon. As a framework for identifying and separating intertwined rhythms, he builds a terminology of the ways in which rhythms differ and relate. He terms the coexistence of rhythms polyrhythmia, and coins three ways in which they can relate: eurhythmia is when the rhythms combine smoothly (as in the functioning of a healthy body); isorhythmia is when the rhythms do not just combine smoothly but merge into a higher harmony (as in music); and arrhythmia is when rhythms clash or are out of sync (as in the case of a sick body or in conflicts).

Chen (2016) expands Lefebvre’s terminological framework with the idea of rhythmic assemblages inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). She describes political and social situations as assemblages of multiple rhythms, none of which exist as separate entities, but all of which are in a state of constant exchange. Hence, analysing the social involves identifying the rhythms of the assemblage and the disruptions or conflicts (arrhythmia) and the harmonies (eurhythmia) between them. In other words, rhythmanalysis is one way to study how elements of mediated identities relate to each other when they are eurhythmic, and especially when they are disrupted (arrhythmia) and changed by digital assault and repeated instances of shaming become part of the rhythmic assemblage constituting the self.

As I show in the analysis below, the affective rhythms of shame in DSA depend on digital media. Kofoed (2013) describes such mediated rhythmic assemblages in relation to cyberbullying in school communities. She analyses cyberbullying situations as ongoing phenomena consisting of spectacular events and a subtle sensation of uncertainty, claiming that “the spectacular and the uncertain together make up what can be understood as an affective affair, which moves in rhythms” [my translation]. In other words, there are shifts of intensity in cyberbullying situations defined by recurrent spectacular events, while the uncertainty — the general feeling that something is wrong and it is impossible to know when it will break out and for whom — makes up the underlying pulse of the rhythm. This uncertainty is amplified by the persistence and shareability of data.

In this framework, rhythms of DSA and digital exposure control and moderate the subject. Rhythms of recurring digital exposure create shame and the constant potentiality of shame. These affects are part of constituting the victims’ mediated identities as affective and rhythmic assemblages. However, DSA victims have the agency to affect rhythms as well.

Lefebvre (1992) writes about the possibility of inflicting change and creating new rhythmic hegemonies:

> Objectively, for there to be change, a social group, a class or caste must intervene by imprinting a rhythm on an era, be it through force or in an insinuating manner. In the course of a crisis, in a critical situation, a group must designate itself as an innovator or producer of meaning. [6]

While Lefebvre here talks about historical change, it is relevant in this context to pay attention to the idea that a moment of crisis (a situation of arrhythmia) leaves space for interventions producing new meaning. The fact that DSA is a crisis for the individual also means that there is space for new resisting rhythms, meanings and identities to be formed, so, arrhythmia includes the possibility of change in the formation of new eurhythmic assemblages.

In his work on illness blogs, Stage (2014) shows how writing online blogs and sharing stories of illness became a way for three critically ill women to “structure the chaos of arrhythmia through new socially produced rhythms that stabilise the private life of the blogger” [7]. In other words, the arrhythmia that is caused by illness (or assault) calls for innovative ways of creating a new rhythmic order that can form a less chaotic rhythm of everyday life. Stage also points out that these new rhythms are “turning the blogger into a publicly active citizen” [8] because their blogging becomes part of communal and political efforts to raise awareness of and improve the treatment of their respective illnesses — generating the potential for social change in rhythmic resistance.
Similarly, the analysis will show how Mathilde, Amalie, Karen, Anne-Mette and Leonora tried to create counter rhythms to those of the assaults, both to structure their own daily lives and to join collective efforts leading towards social change. Before moving on to this analysis, however, I will describe the methodological and empirical basis behind it.

Methodology: A participatory writing experiment

As Figure 2 illustrates, the data construction process can be split roughly into three interventions producing the vast majority of the empirical data.
The first intervention (W1-4) was a series of four creative writing workshops in which Mathilde, Karen and Amalie were involved. These workshops were spread over eight months, and after they were over, we kept in touch with relevant news about the project and their cases. About 1½ years after the end of the workshops, I conducted follow-up interviews, meeting each of the participants individually. During the workshops, the focus had been on finding shared perspectives and developing mutual understandings, and it was therefore relevant to go back and discuss some of their texts and statements outside the group, where there was more space for expressing individualities.

After the follow-up interviews, I also realised the need to look into DSA stories in a broader time perspective. The writing tasks in the initial workshops had been concerned with describing and comprehending moments of shame, exposure and empowerment, and we had only sporadically talked about how these instances changed over time. Therefore, I invited Amalie, Mathilde and Karen to join me in developing a new set of writing tasks that would encourage reflections on time, repetitions and change. Amalie and Mathilde agreed to participate, while Karen did not have the time. This was supposed to form the basis of a one-day writing workshop, this time including a new group of participants. However, because of the COVID-19 lockdown, we had to re-schedule and the writing tasks were done from home. For Leonora and Anne-Mette, the two new participants, these tasks were followed by online interviews in which I talked to them about their texts. The extent of each participant’s involvement is shown by their initials in Figure 2. I have described the methodology and the principles of the creative writing workshops in detail elsewhere (Uldbjerg, 2021), so I will only comment on them briefly here.

All the interventions involved discussions based on the written texts that had been produced by the participants. This method comes from creative writing, where it is used as a pedagogical tool, for instance in literature programmes (Donnelly and Harper, 2013; Ringgaard, 2013) and author schools (Lind, 2020; Llambias, 2015). In the traditional creative writing workshop, writers get together to read their texts aloud and give each other feedback based on principles and techniques for aesthetic writing that are often derived from reading literary texts or listening to experienced authors (Lind, 2020). In the workshops, Karen, Mathilde and Amalie therefore learned about creative writing and were asked to implement the techniques into texts about their own experiences. In the writing tasks that Leonora and Anne-Mette did, and owing to the restraints of the digital format, there was no introduction to creative writing. Instead, they were asked to construct narratives on which the discussions could be based.

Apart from principles of creative writing, the writing tasks that I gave the participants also drew on a tradition that I call therapeutic writing (Bolton, 2011; Bolton, et al., 2006; McNichol, 2016), overlapping with traditions like expressive writing (Pennebaker, 1997) and reflective writing (Bolton, 2009; Charon, 2001). The idea behind this tradition is that writing can be a way to express, reflect on and relieve trauma. Working with reflection, expression and narratives also involves an ethical commitment to the construction of a process that was safe and beneficial for the participants.

The idea of using text conversations and creative expressions as research methods calls for a methodological framework that considers practical and creative interventions in research. I have drawn on traditions like practice-based (Hope, 2016), art-based (Davies, 2014; Hickey-Moody, 2013), creative (Kara, 2015) and experimental (Blackman, 2012; Staunæs and Kofoed, 2015a; 2015b) methods to support the argument that creative expressions can offer insights into dynamic experiences, which are not just reflections of a series of events but become part of constructing alternative perspectives that can benefit the participants and produce many-faceted, in-depth empirical data.

Finally, I wish to offer a few words on the participatory aspects. I understand participation in this context as a methodological and ethical effort to include the research participants in decision making during the research process and allow their perspectives to shape the research output (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). Here, I also draw on action research (Koirala-Azad and Fuentes, 2009; Naples, 2003), and feminist ethics (Bellacasa, 2017; Gilligan, 2014), emphasising the moral obligations connected to doing research with (and not just about) vulnerable and politically motivated groups. While the participatory aspect of co-designing the third intervention with Amalie and Mathilde is clear, there is also a less obvious participatory standpoint in the writing workshops. During the text conversations, the participants collectively analysed and discussed each other’s texts, thereby adding a level of collective text analysis that goes beyond just creating data on DSA. Further, after the collective analysis of the workshops was over, the
participants were offered the chance to read and comment on publications and presentations based on their contributions.

Seen from the outside, this research process might look messy and at times incomplete. And it is. The five women involved here are young and facing difficult challenges not just in becoming adults, but also in becoming adult women living with sexual trauma. So, their participation in the project is just as precarious as their life situations, making it ethically necessary to create a dynamic process in which they can participate and contribute to the extent they feel able to. Consistency was never a precondition for this methodology, instead, I wish to present in-depth perspectives on assault experiences, and on the chaotic, inconsistent, dynamic lives that victims might live.

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**Three rhythms of DSA: Fear, exposure and potentiality**

One of the concepts that the participants often returned to was ‘the repeated assault’ — The notion that, in Mathilde’s words, “it’s more than just one assault [...] it’s an assault almost every time you are contacted and confronted with it.” Here, she refers to the recurring instances of being contacted on social media, thereby describing a rhythm that is highly mediated. In one of her creative writing texts, Amalie expresses something similar:

> It is quiet, and I think I am staring into my phone screen, Facebook, easily recognisable in blue and white. Suddenly the phone vibrates, it tickles my hand, and out of nowhere, a tiny red dot with a number in it appears by the miniature of a person’s silhouette. A friend request has come in. It is faceless, no information, only the grey outline of a person.

> [...] I decline.

> A few seconds later, my phone vibrates again. The same red dot appears, again with a number in it. A new friend request, but from the same anonymous grey silhouette as before. I decline.

> This is repeated a couple of times.

This excerpt of a longer text exemplifies how Amalie uses the creative writing format to play with layout, repetition and sentence length in order to give a sense of the rhythmic component of her experience. The text shows that looking at rhythm, understood as repetition and return (Lefebvre, 1992), is relevant in relation to immediate DSA experiences. Return, however, is also a relevant consideration over time. Leonora, who does not remember the situation in which the images were taken, talks about the idea of her memory potentially returning:

> If it came back today, I think I would be afraid of having to reconsider everything. The point where it turned for me was in the week after it happened when I received the pictures. Before that, I was like, something happened at that party, I don’t remember it, it’s probably not too bad.

Here, Leonora deals with two different but intertwined ways in which the assault might potentially be repeated: she is afraid that her memory of the night will return; and she is afraid that the pictures will return in an external repetition of the assault. When the assault first happened, these two levels were intertwined, as the pictures forced her to deal with and create a memory of a situation that she did not actually remember. This story shows that repetition in DSA is linked to digital media, and that the repeated assault depends on the persistence of digital elements, or the fact that DSA images continue to exist and maintain a connection to the victim as a layer of their mediated existence (Karppi, 2018).

As I also argued earlier, the persistence and circulation of the images contribute to an underlying uncertainty (*e.g.*, Leonora’s fear that her memory will return, or Amalie waiting for the next contact request), which is very similar to
what Kofoed describes as the pulse of cyberbullying situations. It feeds an underlying shame, or fear of shame, similar to what Mann (2018) calls ubiquitous shame and Wurmser (2015) terms shame anxiety. Hence, in this constellation, the repeated assault poses rhythmic shifts in intensity between an underlying fear of shame and moments of exposure or shame events (Mann, 2018).

This analysis helps to identify two rhythms in the DSA assemblage, both of which are connected to digital media: the repeated instances of exposure, and the underlying, constant fear of the next contact. This mirrors the rhythms of uncertainty and spectacular events that Kofoed described in cyberbullying. However, I will argue that there is a third rhythmic layer to DSA experiences which is linked to the potential onlooker and often to contact requests on social media. This rhythm becomes clear when Anne-Mette says:

> When somebody messages me on Facebook or Instagram and it comes up as a message request, that’s what happened back then, then I get this feeling like ‘Oh no, now it’s starting all over again’.

The anxiety connected to receiving a contact or friend request is not exactly a moment of exposure, because the reaction to the ‘ping’ of the phone happens before she has seen the message. However, it causes a moment of increased intensity that is different from the more constant underlying fear. This third rhythmic component can be described as the rhythmic aspect of the potential onlooker; it is the intensity of the moment of potential assault that is caused by the more constant general fear of exposure. This rhythm of potentiality creates a bridge between underlying fear and exposure because it occurs at the moment when fear turns into shame. However, it is also a rhythm in itself because it does not always turn into exposure: some contact requests are not related to the original assault, after all. In this way, this rhythm of shame potentiality and the potential onlooker connects shame anxiety (Wurmser, 2015) with shame events (Mann, 2018), or in the terminology of Kofoed (2013), it connects the pulse of underlying fear with the recurring spectacular events. These three rhythms of shame in DSA are illustrated in Figure 3, which shows one example of an interval.

![Figure 3: Three rhythms of shame in DSA.](image)

In conclusion, this analysis adopts Lefebvre and Chen’s methodological approach to analysing the social by identifying its rhythms and their relations. I present three rhythmic components of DSA experiences: underlying fear of exposure or shame anxiety, returning exposure or shame events, and a rhythm of potentiality that exists separately but also bridges the other two components.
Breaking the rhythms: Disruption, change and decline

Having analysed the rhythmic components of assaults, I will now look at the ways these change over time and through active interference. The analysis falls into three parts: First, I look at the ways in which the participants tried to disrupt the repeated assault and re-establish some sense of eurhythmia in the time shortly after these assaults occurred. Second, I look at shame modulations: how shame turns into anger, and how the participants shifted the meaning of the assault by politicising their experiences. Third, I show how the rhythms of the repeated assault not only shift but also decline over time.

Disruption and rhythmic control

When giving a narrative account of their experiences, Amalie, Mathilde, Karen, Leonora and Anne-Mette all focused on the things they had done to try and stop the images from spreading, thereby disrupting the rhythms of the repeated assault. Unfortunately, only Karen and Leonora had positive experiences of taking their cases through the established legal systems: Leonora felt that the police gave her good advice even when they could not investigate, and Karen was lucky to be represented by a steadfast lawyer, even when the police investigation failed. The other participants turned to different ways of using (and not using) social media to interfere with the assault. Mathilde and Amalie talk about their social media practices as follows:

Mathilde: Every time I see guys who comment something degrading, and I can tell that they are that kind of person, I block them because I am panicking about it.

Amalie: Yes, and if a profile comes up in friend requests that you don’t have any shared friends with, I block it.

[...]

Mathilde: I get Facebook messages, not every day, but often. Especially in the past. And I have extra security on all my logins and change my passwords often [...] And then I have an Instagram account that is closed and I only follow people, I mean other girls, who have the same interests as I do.

Amalie and Mathilde are talking about their ways of seeking to regain rhythmic control. These practices do not stop the images from circulating, but they keep people from contacting and finding them, thereby delaying the instances of contact and exposure (the shame events). For Amalie and Mathilde in particular, these practices involving modifying networks, changing passwords and sometimes regularly deactivating accounts became routines that they incorporated into their everyday life with digital media. Such routines, as suggested by Pink, et al. (2018), can be seen as ways of living with data and coping with data anxiety, which is an underlying form of anxiety related to not knowing what is happening to your data. Pink, et al. show that developing routines around data safety can be a way to tackle the anxiety of losing data. In a similar way, Amalie and Mathilde’s social media routines can be seen as ways to interfere with the uncontrollable spreading and exposure and create their own routines or counter rhythms to regain a sense of control and stability, in other words to construct a new, more eurhythmic state.

Karen and Anne-Mette took an opposite approach to using social media. Instead of trying to keep their accounts detached from the images, they used Facebook to share their stories. Anne-Mette, who was being blackmailed by someone threatening to send the images to her friends and family, elaborates on her choice to share the story:

I wanted to make people aware that it was happening, that these pictures existed, and someone would probably send them to somebody. So I meant to try to get a little help just in case anybody was contacted and received some of the pictures.

Like Mathilde and Amalie’s approach, Anne-Mette’s choice to be open about her situation does not stop the image circulation. However, the extortion stopped after she came forward, as she explains:
I think I have more control in relation to the person who has been blackmailing me. Because I have come forward with it and people around me know about it, it is not so exciting to blackmail me anymore.

Here and at several other moments, Anne-Mette mentions being in control as a reason for wanting to interfere with the image sharing. So, her approach is not very different from Amalie and Mathilde’s approach — they also tried to gain control by modifying their social media presence. But while Amalie and Mathilde negotiate the affordances of social media and use its functions in ways that the media design discourages (Davis and Chouinard, 2016), Anne-Mette and Karen, when sharing their stories, use Facebook exactly as it encourages: for social sharing. In this way, Anne-Mette and Karen perform (Papacharissi, 2012) new versions of their digital selves that include the assault experiences in their identity. This changes the rhythm of shame, because exposure no longer has the same power in undoing the self, as they have already embraced this exposure as part of their current identity. Limiting the use of social media delays the rhythm of shame events but using social media to be open about such events reduces their intensity.

This strategy does not always work either, and both Anne-Mette and Karen describe situations of trying to hide from the shaming look just like Amalie and Mathilde. However, both the strategies mentioned here create agency and stability in a situation in which the participants had lost control of their digital existence. In this way, they interfere with the mediated rhythms of the repeated assault. Even though completely erasing the images from social media is impossible (Karppi, 2018), they find ways to resist the circulation that social media are designed to facilitate, and they manage to build a new sense of eurhythmia in their everyday lives (Stage, 2014).

**Change and rhythmic agency**

Focusing on longer-term ways of coping, the participants also described how their relation to DSA and the ways in which they reacted to continuous exposure changed over time. Two ideas recurred: first, they described a gradual shift from shame to anger; and second, they talked about how “using it for something constructive” had given them a sense of meaning and made it easier to live with.

The shift from shame to anger is clear in the two ways in which Mathilde talks about her neighbour:

I have this weird feeling about my neighbour. He always looks at me weirdly, and he seems like the kind of person who could do something like that [...] He knows what name is on my door. I have changed my name now and I have been very afraid that he will upload my new name to those sites. (Workshop4)

He tried to get into my apartment [...] he didn’t get through but then he went to the other side, there is a woman who has PTSD, and she opened the door because she knows him, and then he attacked her. So she called the police and they took him away in handcuffs. [...] A few weeks later, I saw him outside the grocery store, and we had eye contact and I was just ready to go over and yell at him, or even do something physical. I was so angry, it was like something turned at that point [...] He was just wearing boxers and boots [when the police picked him up] and his trousers were hanging around his ankles, so it was really humiliating for him. It felt good to see him humiliated like that. (Follow-up interview)

In the first story about her neighbour, she describes how he triggers her shame anxiety by posing as a potential onlooker. In the second story, however, seeing him humiliated changes something for her. In my previous article on shame, I described how contra-shaming — turning the shaming look around to look back at the potential aggressor — was a way in which the participants could defy shame. Similarly, Mathilde here describes how her shame, when seeing him humiliated, switches to anger and her fear is overruled. Probyn, et al. (2019) elaborated on the relation between shame and anger in cases of sexual violence:

In terms of rape, it’s surely a mixture of anger, rage and shame that women feel, but given the structural/cultural milieu in which we live,
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that anger is not allowed voice as much as the shame. [...] But there are many political movements where rage is again being mobilised as a shield, as reparation against the idea that women should feel ashamed of being raped. [9]

The idea that rage becomes a shield against shaming resonates with Mathilde’s story about anger taking over her shame. She is still responding affectively to exposure and potential assault; but instead of this affective intensity turning into shame, it turns into anger, which allows her to act in relation to her aggressor.

For many of the participants, this anger was political, especially for Amalie, who said:

I feel like I have been able to turn it into something constructive and use it to fight the structures that create digital sexual assaults. [...] I generally always have it at the back of my mind, but it doesn’t control my life anymore, and I feel more anger and an urge to go against it.

In this quote, she addresses anger/agency as reasons why shame does not control her life anymore. For her, turning it into something constructive is central for her recovery, which means that using and politicising her experiences allow her to gain agency and take back control of her (mediated) self. Karen, Leonora and Anne-Mette have similar stories, and they all play an active role in fighting DSA: Karen and Anne-Mette give public speeches; Anne-Mette has an Instagram account (@kampenmodsextortion) dedicated to raising awareness of sextortion [10]; Amalie has been involved in feminist grassroots activism; and Leonora is a volunteer at Offerrådgivningen, which is an anonymous support line for victims of sexual violence.

Hence, the notion of “doing something constructive with it” involves politicising their individual experiences and seeing them in a broader perspective. Returning to the idea of the assault as a rhythmic assemblage, this perspective broadens the assault assemblage to include a larger range of political movements and developments (Chen, 2016). The rhythmic assemblage of the repeated assault can be broadened to include another linear rhythm in society — one of consistent and violent sexism — its counter rhythm being, e.g., the feminist movement, which aims to disrupt century-old cultural traditions, or, in the words of Lefebvre (1992), aims to “intervene by imprinting a rhythm on an era” [11]. In other words, anger can become a counter rhythm that shields people from individual shaming and imprints a new, appropriate affective response to sexual violence that seeks to remove shame from assemblages of sexual assault.

Finally, it is relevant to add that the participants saw participation in this research project as part of a movement towards change. Amalie, for example, said that “projects like this make it possible to take back the power a little bit”. Of course, not all victims of DSA (or other kinds of sexual violence) have the resources to politicise their experiences and engage in collective meaning making. Amalie, Mathilde, Karen, Anne-Mette and Leonora represent a privileged group of assault victims. However, it is relevant to add that for Amalie, Mathilde and Karen, part of this politicisation process happened during (and partly because of) the workshops.

Declining rhythms

In the follow-up interviews with Mathilde, Amalie and Karen, and in in the text-conversations with Leonora and Anne-Mette, I asked them if their experiences of shame had changed over time. They all agreed that they had; and even though some of them are still being contacted, this is happening less frequently. However, this does not mean that the rhythms of repeated assault disappear completely. For example, during the follow-up interview, Mathilde describes her experiences of potential onlookers like this:

It happens sometimes when a young man looks at me in a certain way or I get eye contact with someone who laughs and moves on. Then I get the same feeling, but I also think that it’s okay. I can feel it but I don’t want it to influence the rest of my day, so in the moment I feel it and then I can push it away again.

And Amalie elaborates on shame and the decline of regular exposure as follows:

I don’t really think I am ashamed about it anymore at all. But this is also because it has been a long time since I was last confronted with it. [...] I think I would be ashamed or embarrassed if anyone
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confronted me with it in a negative way, because they think that I am gross or wrong. Then it would be imposed on you to be ashamed, and of course you feel that way then.

Interestingly, shame in these quotes has turned from being something the participants felt was constantly present, to being something that is imposed on them in specific situations. The underlying fear of shame has almost disappeared in their everyday lives, so that they mainly have to deal with the assault in cases where they feel watched (the rhythm of potentiality) or when they are confronted, and these two rhythms even seem to decline in frequency. This decline happens alongside the affective modulations described above, which is particularly interesting in relation to the rhythm of potentiality: as they start to feel more in control, they also perceive potential assaults less often. Because the potential onlooker is imagined, shame anxiety and potentiality are closely connected. This means that when they get to the point when they stop waiting for the next assault to happen, both the underlying shame anxiety and the rhythms of potentiality almost disappear, leaving only isolated instances of exposure. These instances, as Amalie describes, are instances that they regard as the imposition of shame on them by other people, which is easier to resist in a broader politicised perspective.

Conclusion

Talking to DSA victims and people representing them, the idea that ‘it never ends’ is prevalent. This analysis has shown that even though DSA might never end completely, it declines and changes over time. Even though there is no returning to the time before the assault, and even though the data persists, there are several possibilities for victims to claim agency and redefine themselves in positive ways.

First, I offered a framework for defining kinds of DSA by specifying which acts were non-consensual and therefore assaulting. Second, I identified three rhythmic components of the repeated assault: a rhythm of exposure and shame events, a rhythm of potentiality and an underlying rhythm of shame anxiety. I then moved on to show the ways in which these rhythms change and are disrupted over time and through active interference.

The two strategies that the participants used to regain some sense of control and rhythmic stability (eurhythmia) during the period immediately after the assaults involved taking steps to limit and control their digital existence and networks, or being open about the assault on social media, thereby including the assault as part of their mediated identities. While the first strategy delays the rhythms of assault by making contact less frequent, the second strategy reduces the intensity of the assault because it means that exposure no longer has the same shaming power.

In a broader perspective, I have shown that politicising the assault and thereby expanding the assault assemblage allowed the participants to gain agency and sometimes turn shame into anger. Anger, I argued, can become a counter rhythm that shields people from individual shaming if it is part of a broader political movement framing sexual violence as injustice rather than personal failure. Hence, anger instead of shame becomes an appropriate answer to assault, allowing the victim a greater sense of agency and control.

Finally, it became clear that the rhythms of DSA also decline over time. The confrontations or shame events become less regular; and as the participants started to feel less ashamed and therefore stopped constantly fearing the next assault, the rhythms of shame anxiety and potentiality almost disappeared. Shame, instead of being a constant condition, over time and through rhythmic resistance and affective modulations became something which was momentarily imposed, which they were able to shake off and blame on others instead of themselves.

Even though the trauma of digital sexual assault might never go away completely, living with it becomes easier over time and, most importantly, through personal and collective resistance to rhythms of shame — whether these are the mediated rhythms of exposure, potentiality and anxiety, or the broader societal rhythms and assemblages of sexual violence that wrongfully impose shame on victims. These insights have, or should have, implications for the ways in which DSA victimhood is addressed in academic, political and pedagogical discourses. To support victims in their coping processes leading towards regaining agency, we must move away from the idea that ‘it never ends’ towards more representative and nuanced understandings of victimhood.

This paper has contributed to our knowledge of mediated experiences of DSA from a victim perspective. Future work in the field could expand this perspective to include a broader and more diverse range of experiences, and to further
The rhythms of shame in digital sexual assault: Rhythmic resistance and the repeated assault consider the relations between media and victimisation.

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Notes

1. A former version of this categorisation was published in *Mediekultur* (Uldbjerg, 2020).
10. Anne-Mette has requested that this information is shared in order to promote her work.

References


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