Shame, shaming and economy: A theory of image-based sexual abuse within different online sharing environments  
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Abstract
Since 2014, non-consensual sharing of intimate images online has gained attention in the scientific community. Little literature exists on why and how perpetrators undertake these activities. This paper provides a theoretical and conceptual typology for different forms of image-based sexual abuse that unfold online within two different sharing environments: 1) an acquaintance-based environment; and, 2) an organized, anonymous environment. The empirical data consist of nine qualitative interviews with Danish perpetrators (aged 15–25 years) from both sharing environments and 12 months of extensive digital ethnography on dark Web pages. Our findings suggest that digital sexual abuse can be conceptualized in relation to two factors, namely, 1) the market structure of the activity; and, 2) the sharers’ feelings of acknowledged and unacknowledged shame. We find that especially sharers from organized, anonymous environments show signs of unacknowledged shame through shaming exposed ones, while sharers from acquaintance-based environments retrospectively acknowledge shame by recognizing the negative consequences their sharing praxis had to the abused.

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Introduction
Non-consensual and consensual sharing of intimate images are widespread activities reported in regions in Europe, Australia, South Korea, the United States, India, and Nigeria (Gámez-Guadix, et al., 2015; Morelli, et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel, et al., 2017; Ringrose, et al., 2013, 2012; Kerstens and Stol, 2014; Lee, et al., 2016; Strassberg, et al., 2014; Halder and Jaishankar, 2013; Olatunde and Balogun, 2017; Harder, et al., 2019; Albury and Crawford, 2012). There is evidence that the activity has serious negative consequences for those exposed on emotional, psychological, and social levels (Bates, 2017; Wolak, et al., 2012; Siegle, 2010; Korenis and Billick, 2014). During the last decade, the consensual type of the activity (often termed sexting) has been explored (see Lenhart, 2009; Klettke, et al., 2014; Handyside and Ringrose, 2017), often as an integral part of young men and women’s everyday lives (Ringrose, et al., 2012; Cooper, et al., 2016; Roberts and Ravn, 2020). Recent research has dominantly been on the non-consensual distribution of content (see Langlois and Slane, 2017; Bates, 2017; Harder, et al., 2019) where the concept of image-based sexual abuse has gained traction in studies addressing the understanding of both the practice and the meanings of
non-consensual image sharing (e.g., McGlynn, et al., 2017; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2016; Henry, et al., 2018; Pacheco, et al., 2019). The definition of image-based sexual abuse ensures that the offender is clearly defined as someone sending pictures of a sexual nature without consent, and that the pictures are not just non-consensually shared due to, for example, a technological mistake.

Image-based sexual abuse takes place across various technological platforms both within the clear Web (Snapchat and Facebook) (Ringrose, et al., 2012; Kofoed and Larsen, 2016) and dark Web (Web sites, volas, and Discords) [1] (Langlois and Slane, 2017; Uhl, et al., 2018). The field of image-based sexual abuse has on the one hand worked along the lines of understanding how the digital is embedded and embodied in everyday life but has focused less on socio-technological environments (e.g., organized and anonymous sharing environments). In addition, the field is left with an insufficient understanding of the socio-technological and emotional interactions within online sharing environments. Furthermore, existing literature has until now primarily focused on the perspective of victimization without investigating the offenders — with the exceptions of Langlois and Slane (2017) and Uhl and colleagues (2018). This article aims at exploring how perpetrators from different sharing environments undertake and maintain their activities technologically, socially, and emotionally.

The gendered perspective of the activity and the examination of women’s repressed position constitute prominent issues (Hasinoff, 2013; Klettke, et al., 2014; Ringrose, et al., 2013, 2012). Hence, the activity has often been termed as “revenge porn” (Branch, et al., 2017; Bates, 2017). This phrase has, however, been criticized due to its highly simplistic rationale and meaning ascribed with “revenge” (Dodge, 2020), as well as the problematic use of “pornography”, which by its very definition is an activity involving assumed consent between sexual partners (Whisnant, 2016). Within image-based sexual abuse studies, some research has started to focus on the feelings of shame among the abused (Walker, et al., 2013; Powell and Henry, 2014; Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Mortensen, 2020; Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021). Mortensen (2020) found that women exposed to non-consensual image-sharing develop strategies for defying feelings of shame, and Dobson and Ringrose (2016) examined how “sext education” campaigns in the U.K. and Australia constructed narratives and enhanced discourses of sexual shaming of girls and women. Naezer and van Oosterhout found that young boys perceived sexting to be a shameful activity “only undertaken by weak, insecure, desperate and/or stupid people (girls),” [2] and that this lack of understanding rendered non-consensual image sharing possible through victim blaming.

As such, there is a void in the literature when it comes to the examination of how perpetrators undertake and relate emotionally to the activity within different socio-technological structures and whether they perceive engagement in the activity as shameful. In line with this, we explore how emotions of shame (both acknowledged and unacknowledged) are shaped as part of the intersection between economy, technology, sexuality, and social norms. In other words, this perspective recasts the analysis of the culture of image-based sexual abuse into a slightly different version where environments, perpetrators, and their socio-technological and emotional structures are examined.

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**Theory**

We suggest a conceptual differentiation between acquaintance-based sharing environments (ASEs) and organized sharing environments (OSEs; see Figure 1 below). Within each environment image-based sexual abuse take different forms. We define an ASE as an environment where sharers usually know each other; the activity is embedded in a youth culture; and social media platforms such as Facebook (both via Messenger and within closed groups), Instagram, Snapchat, and Dropboxes are used for sharing. Within an OSE, the sharers usually do not know each other and appear anonymous, the praxis is rather organized, and sharing platforms — Web pages, volas, and Discords — are placed on the dark Web. We thus developed two parameters; 1) the technological sharing platforms; and, 2) the characteristics of relations both internally between perpetrators and between perpetrators and abused, to nuance and explain the differences in the activity within and across two sharing environments. This approach has the necessary open-endedness towards perpetrator motivations and emotional relatedness that is essential not to reduce differences across sharing environments.
Within image-based sexual abuse, Ravn and colleagues (2021) discussed how young women’s pictures can entitle certain values in a study of Australian men’s sexting practices. They argued that both value and risk were related to contemporary gender relations (Ravn, et al., 2021). Their conclusions specified what has been found in other studies — namely that women’s bodies are especially central in the value of their subjectivities (see also Ringrose, et al., 2013; Langlois and Slane, 2017). These sociological studies point towards a double standard of gender. Within this paper, we do not focus directly on how these gendered double standards are constructed but investigate how women’s bodies can have value for heterosexual men and how that value is negotiated and formed in relation to feelings of shame within ASEs and OSEs.

Within our framework, we describe sexually explicit pictures and videos as assets that are negotiated and hold various currencies. We are aware that adapting a terminology of assets and currencies can be perceived as offensive, as the relation to others’ bodies is valued in the context of sex. It can be argued that the terminology has a tendency to neutralize offenders’ behaviour. Such criticism has been raised towards cultural criminologists’ perspectives of “subcultural outlaw groups” (Hayward, 2016). To be reliable to our data we do, however, find it necessary to address exactly how different types of offenders relate to pictures and bodies as assets and negotiate these for different currencies that can be assisted by various feelings of shame.

This analysis makes use of Thomas Scheff’s approach to shame. He defines shame as:
“... a large family of emotions that includes many cognates and variants, most notably embarrassment, humiliation, and related feelings such as shyness that involve reactions to rejection or feelings of failure or inadequacy.” [3] Scheff describes shame as the premier social emotion, since it is engendered by even the slightest threat to the social bond (Scheff, 2000; Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). In extension, it is argued that the generation of shame in social interaction occurs through a continuous self-evaluation carried out on the basis of others’ appreciation or discrediting of the individual. Scheff and Retzinger (1991) emphasize what precedes and follows from the social meeting, which is described through their conceptualization of shame-anger spirals. The shame-anger spiral indicates how unacknowledged and repressed shame might lead to anger, followed by shame of being angry, and so on. In this way, unacknowledged shame can cause conflict escalation and intensify anger (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). When shame is acknowledged, it usually serves to strengthen and regenerate the social bond that was threatened by the unacknowledged shame, but when not acknowledged it constitutes a problem (Scheff, 2000).

The above framework on shame will be used to guide an empirically led development of the conceptualization of the activity’s market structure and of the various feelings of shame among perpetrators. The variations between ASEs and OSEs will be analysed and discussed as wedded to the socio-technological structure of the environments, including the two previously mentioned parameters (the technological sharing platforms and the characteristics of relations).

Method and research design

This paper is based on digital ethnography on dark Web pages and nine qualitative single interviews with offenders from the two types of sharing environments. Both online and off-line sampling strategies were applied in the data collection process. More than 200 users of sharing sites and members of social media groups were contacted. Participants were recruited via sharing platforms both on the clear Web and the dark Web, through school visits and via gatekeepers. The combination of digital ethnography and qualitative interviews allows us to explore both the social dynamics and context of activities as well as how activities are established and maintained from the perspectives of perpetrators (see also Ringrose, et al., 2012).

Ethical considerations

Ethnography for the study of illicit transactions in online environments is still developing and has not yet formalized well-defined ethical protocols (Ferguson, 2017). Most online ethnography faces the same issues in establishing informed consent based on how open or closed a group or environment is (Willis, 2019). This problem is accelerated even further in criminology, as consent is not likely to be given due to the illegality of the behaviour. We have followed a research protocol that we have developed in tandem with a study of social-media drug dealing (Demant, et al., 2019). This approach has been ethically approved by the University of Copenhagen. We have done our best to ensure no further physical, psychological, or legal harm is caused to the informants or abused. This has been undertaken through a combination of the best possible anonymization and by reducing traceability (Porr and Ployhart, 2004; Walford, 2002). While taking such measures, we find it acceptable not to obtain informed consent from users of Web pages, volas, and Discords (Sanders, 2005). Most dark Web pages are structured with a chat section and a folder, where images and videos can be uploaded and downloaded. We were only interested in viewing conversations and conduct on the sites, thus we did not view or download any intimate visual material. A few times a blurred, non-intimate image popped up in chats, in all instances the face was covered. We did not take any screenshots of those images, and thus we protected exposed ones from further harm.

To reduce traceability, pseudonyms for all names (fictional and real), usernames, geographical places, and Web pages were provided (Bruckman, 2004). Inspired by Steinmetz, we have subjected the quotes from online fieldwork used within the paper to searches through Google and Yahoo. Since none of them showed up, we considered them safe to use (Steinmetz, 2012). Text-based interviews were carried out via encrypted communication channels (Wickr and
encrypted e-mail), making them similarly hard to trace. Moreover, participant safety was further assured as the volas and Discords self-destructed typically within 48 hours. The Web page through which we obtained e-mail addresses no longer exists. Thus conversations that we observed within these fora were non-traceable.

Researcher protection is of great concern within a field where crimes are defined by misuse of visual and personal information, and in this case where the first author, who has collected the data material, is a young adult female, researcher protection has been of particular concern. Within volas and Discords, a strategy of lurking has secured minimal information within the environments. While lurking provides less information of the study to participants, such a strategy was deemed necessary. Further, all browsing activity was conducted through the encrypted browser Tor. No personal information on researchers was provided to participants, and no online information on the study has been provided prior to this first publication.

Data description and approach

Four qualitative interviews were conducted with sharers from acquaintance-based sharing environments. ASE participants included three males and one female. We conducted two face-to-face interviews, one 70-minute telephone interview, and one encrypted chat interview with a length of four pages. Five single interviews were conducted with sharers from organized sharing environments. All OSE participants were males. We conducted four encrypted e-mail interviews with lengths of between one and five pages and one 50-minute telephone interview. All interviews were transcribed and coded. The digital ethnography consisted of 12 months of lurking on dark Web pages, volas, and Discords. More than 300 screenshots of text-based interactions and chats were captured in a period between March 2017 and April 2018 by approximately two weekly visits per site.

Shame was detected and analysed through participants’ linguistic usages. We analysed markers of shame as expressed through textually mediated testimonies and through informants’ explicit naming of emotions (shame, guilty conscience, embarrassment) and their indirect references (cf., Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). This follows an established method of analysing shame in oral and written mediated markers (Woodward, et al., 2014; Skårderud, 2003). Scheff and Retzinger (1991) propose that hiding behaviour can be perceived as a sign of embarrassment. We followed this interpretation and described observed hiding behaviour as a sign of shame.

Analysis

Shame and market structure within organized sharing environments (OSEs)

There are two different types of actors on organized sharing platforms: demanders (people demanding assets) and suppliers (people supplying assets). The majority appear as both, especially in the case of barter trades. Demanders search for assets based on the geographical location of the abused (cities, municipalities, areas), age, and ethnicity:

“Is there anybody who can help me with ladies from [Danish territory]? Preferably [area]?”

Demands that are more specific include first- and surname; non-intimate pictures of a particular person, or a disclosure of an individual’s place of work or profession. Suppliers both provide specifically demanded assets and non-demanded assets. Supplying non-demanded assets can be a strategy for obtaining assets in the future by being “well-off”, establishing “business partners”, and being a good trader. It ensures a continuous supply, while the former supply form ensures that demands can be met and redeemed. Hence, both forms contribute to maintaining liquidity in the market.

Sharers negotiate and determine the value of assets by collecting information about people abused regarding the number of boys they have hooked up with, their countries of origin, stories regarding their night life and occupational positions, and by disseminating information among other sharers. Within the literature, this is referred to as doxing (Douglas, 2016). Douglas identifies three different types of doxing: 1) de-anonymizing doxing which is a form of non-consensual sharing where a formerly anonymous person’s personal information is disclosed; 2) targeting doxing,
where particular private details that are normally obscure are released; and, 3) delegitimizing doxing, where the revealing of intimate private information is intended to shame and damage a person’s reputation [4]. All three forms of doxing thrive on a large scale within OSEs, where personal information about the depicted is discussed and disclosed. Delegitimizing doxing is usually even malicious and misogynistic, as in a case where leaked photos of women’s breasts before operations at plastic surgical clinics were shared.

Besides holding a specific value assets also generate by-products. Pictures serve as an entry ticket to sexual satisfaction, which the purchasers earn when acquiring an asset. Sexual satisfaction thus appears to be a central motivation for many traders to procure pictures and videos. Additionally, the receivers (buyers) gain power and dominance over the abused by possessing specific pictures. Oskar explains it in the following way:

“I think maybe it also has a bit to do with some sort of power over them [the abused], because I know I have something on them that can make them really sad and unsafe, and that I can destroy so much in their lives just by possessing those pictures.”

This quote further underlines misogynistic behaviour and shows how sharers feel dominance when shaming the exposed. Examples of such shaming is also found in the responses to girls who try to speak up against these activities through posts on sharing pages. The sharers’ responses reveal a patronizing, yet threatening tone:

A: “Stop it — we are more girls who know about this Web page!!!!”
B: “The more you know, the worse you sleep at night, and rapeman is your nightmare.”

Thus, there are no signs of acknowledged shame when sharers are confronted with girls’ reactions and posts. Instead, they are shamed either through reactions to their posts or through the humiliating tone of demands on the sites:

“18 +/− ... Dirty girls ... Pics/vids [pictures and videos]? There must be lots of spoiled girls who enjoy behaving badly and flashing etc.?”

Sharers refer to the abused in a degrading, disrespectful manner. Shame and guilt are removed from the perpetrators and transferred to the abused, articulated in an absence of chastity (see also Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021). Sharers make the abused feel guilty for the activity by removing blame from themselves, which is a sign of unacknowledged shame (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). Thus, the remarks can be seen as expressions of an unconscious strategy for handling a possible unacknowledged shame as it turns into intense hatred (Scheff, 2000) and misogyny. Other sharers demonstrate a double standard. On the one side, Andy, for example, shows a lack of acknowledged or unacknowledged shame. He does not hide behind a pseudonym, he does not care about being revealed, and when asked what it means to him that there is an abused person involved, he replies, “It doesn’t matter — don’t think she thinks about me when I struggle”. Contrary to this, he expresses that he would never share a picture of someone he knows, which underlines his intentions of being hurtful toward the abused. As long as the relation remains anonymous, there is no shame for Andy.

Scheff describes verbal hiding behaviours through which a person shows signs of unacknowledged shame. Examples include mitigation, suppressed references (e.g., “they”), and stating phrases such as “it was just ...” as a way of trying to diminish severity (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). When Lasse says “[I] have to tell you that I am very new in this field”, we interpret it as a way of mitigating the act. Kristian explains why he shares images by referring to common behavioural patterns:

“We are all tempted by the illegal (...) It is just part of human nature.”

These remarks express a need to normalize the activity. By normalizing the act, sharers attempt to establish a balance between themselves and mankind (human nature) by not sticking out and thus neutralizing harm (Sykes and Matza, 1957). As importantly, the quote also underlines a form of self-explanation. To be more precise, justifications may be interpreted as a sign of unacknowledged shame that occurs through a constant self-evaluation. Further, sharers continue carrying out their acts, which indicates that shame is not acknowledged.

When assets are traded a number of positive effects on sharers are accumulated. These can be described as positive currencies (images, economic capital, status). These currencies work as an approval of activities, as they entail a
positive profit. In most cases, the images are not only traded assets, but also constitute a currency, especially in barter trades. As Oskar explains, the activity can be compared to the “sharing [of] Pokémon cards”. In other cases, demanders offer economic capital (e.g., via app-based payment) as payment for images, and in a few other cases, the demander gets what he is looking for and closes the trade in a thankful way, status is traded. Status, however, plays a more minor role than expected. On the contrary, there seems to be also a negative currency related to sharing. Some sharers express disdain towards other sharers, even though they themselves take part. What is interesting is that not even when the negative profit, disdain, is gained, do sharers seem to acknowledge feelings of shame. They establish a position where they do not emotionally react to negative stigma that is established even within organized sharing environments. The feelings of shame alter when moving from organized markets towards acquaintance-based ones (from the right end of the spectrum towards the left in Figure 1). Within acquaintance-based sharing environments shame is to a greater extend acknowledged.

**Shame and market structure within acquaintance-based sharing environments (ASEs)**

In contrast to organized sharing environments, the actors within acquaintance-based sharing environments do not advertise their supplies, and mostly supply non-demanded products, for which they rather appear as holders of assets than as suppliers. Likewise, the receivers do not necessarily demand the material beforehand, and appear more as purchasers. The market structure further differs from that of OSEs insofar as the abused are both males and females, yet the vast majority are females, and sharers are both males and females, though primarily males.

Sharers usually have already established personal relations both to each other and to the abused through local areas, and doxing is therefore not as evident as within OSEs. The value of an asset depends on whether the depicted is well-known among sharers and can potentially be encountered outside a digital space (e.g., in the schoolyard). Noah, who once sold images via Snapchat, explains:

“If it was a specific girl [the receivers] wanted, it was 50 DKK. And if it was someone random, it was 20 DKK.”

Ida, who forwarded pictures of a girl from her school, also explains that one of the things that made the image attractive was that the depicted was someone local:

“It was funny because people knew her and there was a lot of gossiping around that story.”

The factors by which value is determined are thus simpler than within OSEs. Common for the two environments is that the personal aspect is significant for determining an asset’s value; either sharers attempt to establish a “personal” one-way relation within OSEs or the relation, however peripheral, is already established within ASEs. Yet, the environments differ when taking into account how shame is related to personal aspects. Within ASEs, acknowledged shame is part of the sharers’ post-reflections of how the actions might have affected exposed ones. Ida explains:

“You can see today that it is completely wrong, but as you were in it, it was just some kind of gossip.”

Ida acknowledges shame through a recognition of the wrongful aspect of the activity. At the same time, she tries to neutralize the act by formulating it as “just” gossiping.

Noah once hosted a Facebook group with six classmates where they uploaded intimate images of girls that they knew. No shame was related to the activity, as he explains: “I didn’t care. I just uploaded the images and didn’t really think about the girl”. Gabriel also explains that he did not feel shameful for sharing the videos in the first place:

“In the situation, it felt abstract, and we thought she [the girl in the video] had given consent. It was so far out and it had taken place so long ago. In a way, it just did not matter. It was just nice to get some attention by being able to show the videos (...) When the police called me in and when I had to tell my parents, I began to feel a very guilty conscience because I knew they would be disappointed.”

There is a lack of acknowledged shame among sharers in sharing situations. That may have to do with the fact that the
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thrills (Katz, 1988) of receiving assets, by-products, and currencies dominate. The by-products are constituted by the gratification of sexual curiosity. As Valdemar explains, he was “curious to see what the videos contained”, and Ida describes the activity as “female friend curiosity”. The assets are thus part of sexual exploration and a sexual conversation, which may contribute to reduce the element of acknowledged shame. When Gabriel found out that the abused did not give consent, the assets and the by-products somehow lost their value, and the shaming turned into acknowledged shame, like in Ida and Noah’s situations. The social bond to his parents and to the authorities was threatened. In addition, Gabriel’s quote shows that the distance both in time and space reduces feelings of shame. The acknowledgement of shame further has to do with the fact that the activity is revealed and sharers have to look at themselves through the lens of people clearly not recognizing the activity.

Just as the by-products seem to hinder the acknowledgement of shame, currencies obtained can be seen to serve that function. Status and recognition constitute the primary currency form. Within OSEs, status is wedded to procuring a specific asset and to being a good trader within an anonymous environment. The following quote exemplifies that status within ASEs is related to obtaining personal recognition within an already established social milieu:

“You got some sort of an act of kindness or an applause (...) you just felt that, when you went to school and they [classmates] came to you saying, ‘fuck, those pictures are insane’.” (Noah)

When being recognized for their non-consensual sharing praxis, it seems, they do not have a reason to feel ashamed. Secondly, some sharers emphasize cases where they seek some sort of revenge over an ex-partner. The sender secures revenge since purchasers are willing to receive the image and because of the psychosocial expense and shaming the abused experiences. The third currency form is “social membership”, as sharing serves as an entrance ticket to a social community. Noah explains that the social community and the friendship with other sharers was strengthened when the activity was maintained, but after authorities revealed the activity, “it ended with us not talking together anymore”. Common for sharers within ASEs is that the acknowledged shame typically appears when the activity is interrupted. Thus, acknowledgement of shame punctures the market. As exemplified in the above quote from Noah about selling images via Snapchat, economic capital also constitutes a currency in a few cases.

Whereas the currencies and by-products are bodily entrenched and market-driven within organized sharing environments, they are rather embedded in a, however destructive and pathological, social context within acquaintance-based sharing environments. Common for both milieus is that the frictions related with the attempt of recruiting informants indicate an absence of pride and a lack of eagerness to speak of the activity and attempts at avoiding confrontation and condemnation. This hiding behaviour can also be perceived of as the sharers’ attempts to protect themselves against the legal, social, and emotional consequences of engaging in the activities. Such awareness of negative consequences can be interpreted as a recognition that the activities are not socially accepted.

Discussion

Technological structures that provide new forms of online victimization and sexual experimentation have been ascribed as the primary reasons why image-based sexual abuse takes place (Salter, et al., 2013; Ringrose, et al., 2013). A further significant explanation is social pressure (Walker, et al., 2013; Lee, et al., 2016). This study adds to those findings that technology, sexual experimentation, and social pressure take different forms within the two sharing environments that we identified.

Image-based sexual abuse constitutes two different digital marketplaces with actors, assets, by-products, and currencies. However, there is no fine line between the two environments, and this study shows some overlaps between them. Yet the currencies and the feelings of shame vary between the two sharing environments. Within OSEs we found no signs of acknowledged shame. This even held in cases where sharers were confronted with girls’ reactions and posts. Instead, unacknowledged shame turned into intense hatred (Scheff, 2000) and misogyny. This pattern is parallel to what is found within the incel (involuntary celibate) networks (see Cottee, 2021). We found a numbness that resembled the “fatalistic resignation” found in incel environments. Within these environments fatalistic resignation explains and underscores incels’ perceptions of women as evil towards them (as individual and group) because they deprive them of the possibility of sexual intimacy. Thus, “[b]y rejecting both the goal of sexual intimacy and the means of male self-improvement incels transform their shame and inferiority into a form of resistance against the
‘normie’ status quo” [5]. That parallels sharers within OSEs, when they described that they felt no shame as part of their practices, since the girls in the pictures would likewise not care for them if they struggled. The dark Web sharing platforms (parameter 1) and hence the anonymous relations (parameter 2), in which the sharers have no direct (acquainted) relation either to each other or the depicted, made it possible to neutralize actions and to not feel any shame — even when they knew that their acts had emotional consequences to the abused. These consequences in fact established a sense of pride, which seemed to persist even in cases where disdain was expressed from other sharers within the OSEs. Within ASEs we also found that there was a lack of acknowledged shame among sharers. For these sharers the no-shame was linked to the sharing situation. Here gossiping and the thrill dominated their perceptions of what was happening. The acknowledged shame, which was found to be part of their post-reflections of how the actions might have affected the exposed, could be triggered by themselves or via an intervention of law enforcement or significant others. Such acknowledgement was thus wedded to two parameters; the social media — and thus easier traceable — sharing platforms and the more or less acquainted relations both between sharers and between the abused and sharers.

Within the organized sharing environments an attempted “personal” relation was important in order to feel a power over and degrade women, while sharing within acquaintance-based sharing environments was a way of getting to know the depicted ones through lurking.

The differentiation between environments allowed us to identify some rather separate intervention functions. While we would expect social responsibility to have effect mediated by potential shame among sharers, we found that this was probably not the case within OSEs. In OSEs, we noted that some women tried to bring offenders into a different pathway by making posts about a lack of empathy and social responsibility of the activities. Those posts caused further shaming, misogyny, and in some cases even threats towards these women. An intervention by the abused (or representatives of the abused) did not seem to deflect sharers from activities and polyvictimization (DeKeseredy, et al., 2019) within OSEs. Within ASEs, some sharers had been deflected from activities when they were detected by parents or authorities, or if they decided to stop their activities themselves.

There is a potential to use peers as active bystanders in prevention. Harder and colleagues (2019) find that only one out of five people who receives an intimate image will forward it without consent. That finding relates to acquaintance-based sharing environments and indicates that there might thus be potential regarding bystanders who receive pictures without forwarding them in supporting peers not to forward images either (see also Harder, 2020). The empirical design of this study did not yield data to confirm this finding. However, we found that even within organized sharing environments, there was a tendency to take a stance (of dubious moral standard) towards helping sharers avoid violating the penal code related to child pornography (a peer moderation). Studies within the intervention literature find that there is a great probability that bystanders will intervene in cyberbullying if they actually realize that they are witnessing online bullying (Dillon and Bushman, 2015; Machackova and Pfetsch, 2016). Such strategy has greater potential within ASEs. In regards to OSEs, there has primarily been a focus on shutting down sharing platforms and prosecuting perpetrators. Such a deplatforming strategy (Rogers, 2020) runs the risk of a diffusion effect (Gillespie, 2018), and even runs the risk of displacement into other, less traceable dark Web platforms (Ladegaard, 2019). Our findings of the span between acquaintance-based sharing environments and organized sharing environments and the different parameters is a clear indication that we need to push towards differentiated prevention and policy approaches. The technosocial (Powell, et al., 2019) nature of the phenomenon highlights that we may need to work as much with social and emotional aspects as with the technical; a technical approach will also leave the more emotional motivation for offending unaddressed.

Limitations

Offender studies on sexual crimes have always been difficult due to their hard-to-reach populations. This study’s data material prove this point. However, the ability to make encrypted interviews and secure participant and researcher protection is a viable way to move forward. We encourage such studies to further investigate how technology brings and circumvents new conditions for acknowledged and unacknowledged shame. We need further understanding of how shaming postpones and sometimes even eliminates the acknowledgement of shame. The investigation of shame in an online context should also start to address textually mediated uses of emoticons, likes, and linguistics, and thus move towards the development of standardized ways of measuring shame in an online context.
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Notes

1. A *vola* is a cross between a chat room and a file sharing site that differs from traditional Web pages. It can be set up by anyone, and it self-destructs within 48 hours, whereupon its users cannot be traced. Entering requires a link (Kulager, 2016). A *Discord* is a chat platform, and an invitation with an access code is required to enter. The invitation expires within a few hours (Lauritzen and Dreyer, 2017).


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