Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse
by Sidsel K. Harder and Amy A. Hasinoff

Abstract
While a range of studies examine what drives people to nonconsensually distribute sexual images, there is little research on what they feel after having shamed someone online. Do image-sharers feel any shame themselves? Using narrative criminology, we analyze their statements during police investigations to examine if and how they manage shame. We find that many stories about committing image-based sexual abuse deny responsibility, neutralize actions, and deflect blame onto victims. This supports previous qualitative research that offenders are so absorbed by male bonding and a need to control and objectify women that they are incapable of feeling shame after image-based sexual abuse. However, we also find that nearly as many stories about nonconsensual sharing focus on expressing shame for having lost control, admitting to having caused harm, and vowing to lead better lives in the future. These statements describe nonconsensual sexual image sharing as accidental, thoughtless, or impulsive, which supports some previous survey research. Our findings suggest that Internet researchers studying online abuse might pay greater attention to shame management, including how people blame digital technology for harmful behavior. We conclude that restorative justice processes could potentially help people who have committed image-based abuse acknowledge shame and try to repair the harm.

Contents
Introduction
Two models of image-based sexual abuse
Shame management: From deflection to redemption
Narratives in police cases
Analysis: Stories of deflection, victim blaming, and redemption
Discussion: From redemption stories to repair
Conclusion: Stories of digital harm

Introduction
A recent Danish campaign on “The cost of image-based abuse” featured a video of the lead singer of a local pop-band (Nielsen, 2020). He was one of more than 1,000 people charged with sharing abusive sexual images in a large investigation known as the “Umbrella” case (Griffin, 2018). He explained: “One bloody didn’t think about it then, I just didn’t. But I should have. ... I feel bad about myself; I have a super bad conscience about it. It was one click and I am really not like that as a person!” The campaign highlighted someone who was blaming himself for acting carelessly and ashamed of himself for becoming a sexual offender. Viewers’ comments on the campaign site were generally supportive and viewed his apology as a step in the right direction.
In this paper, we examine 34 Danish police cases of image-based sexual abuse and use narrative criminology to analyze how these stories deflect or integrate shame during criminal investigations. Previous research depicts people who have committed image-based sexual abuse as either malicious and irredeemably sexist (e.g., Henry and Flynn, 2019; McGlynn, et al., 2017) or as regretful of their impulsive mistakes (e.g., Eaton, et al., 2017; Walker, et al., 2019). To reconcile these contrasting findings, our study draws on theories of redemptive storytelling and reintegrative shaming. Our analysis of police cases finds two groups of stories that deflect and neutralize shame in different ways, and a third group of stories that acknowledge and integrate shame, often by emphasizing redemption and that the narrator will not reoffend. Across all three groups, narratives manage shame by drawing on popular discourses that blame digital technologies for social ills. By applying theories of restorative justice to online abuse, we suggest that it is possible to help some people acknowledge their shame and make amends.

Two models of image-based sexual abuse

Image-based sexual abuse is “the taking, distributing, and/or making of threats to distribute a nude or sexual image without a person's consent” [1]. A meta-analysis finds that around 12 percent of people self-report that they have nonconsensually forwarded a sexual image (Madigan, et al., 2018). The majority of studies find that men are significantly more likely than women to forward images without permission (Eaton, et al., 2017; Henry, et al., 2019; Powell, et al., 2019; Ruvalcaba and Eaton, 2020). Most studies of image-based sexual abuse describe one of two contrasting motivations for the harm: misogynistic entitlement or carelessness.

Intentional harm, sexism, and male bonding

In the qualitative research, image-based sexual abuse is generally viewed as a practice of sexual violence that men use to gain power over women (McGlynn, et al., 2017) and in which “the shaming process proceeds via predictable patterns inspired by age-old sexism and misogyny” [2]. Online ethnographies describe nonconsensual sharing sites as spaces of “ritualized sexual humiliation” and “peer bonding and esteem building among an online network of sexually deviant peers who collectively use sexual objectification and humiliation as a conduit for sexual gratification and status building” [3]. According to this literature, offenders [4] nonconsensually share sexual images with a clear intent to harm and humble victims and the rationalization that they “deserved” the abuse (e.g., Uhl, et al., 2018). One study explains:

Most men ... claimed the women deserved being posted because they were reported to have controlled the relationship, committed infidelity, passed on an STD, stolen money or committed sexual acts in return for money and stolen “his” children, thus constructing online pornography as, in their own terms, a legitimate form of interpersonal revenge. [5]

In online comments, offenders justify image-based sexual abuse as a proportional response to their female victims’ supposedly shameful acts. Another study consisting of interviews with offenders and stakeholders (including police, lawyers, and psychologists) supports this conclusion, finding that “these perpetrators harboured such pronounced dislike and resentment towards the victim ... that they were incapable of feeling remorse for the potential shame and embarrassment they caused by sharing the intimate image” [6].

Generally, qualitative research describes image-based sexual abuse as a “deviant” or extreme manifestation of normative masculinity and heteronormativity driven by malicious intent, peer bonding, and misogyny. Consistent with those motivations, offenders who are confronted with their actions generally minimize responsibility by shaming victims and explaining that they were entitled to share the images.

Ambivalence and carelessness

In contrast, survey research finds that the majority of people who have nonconsensually shared images view their actions as careless rather than malicious and problematic rather than justified. For example, one survey found that around two-thirds of people who had shared images without consent reported that they would not have done so if
they had taken more time to think about it or if they knew how much it would hurt the victim (Eaton, et al., 2017). Another study found that people who reported that they had only shared an image without consent once were more likely than people who repeated this behavior to say they did so “without realizing” what they were doing (12 percent vs. 7 percent) (Barrense-Dias, et al., 2020). The authors suggest those participants may have later realized the harm done and thus did not repeat the behavior. Some people may be impulsive, seeking instant gratification both online and elsewhere: nonconsensual senders are more likely to have low self-control and engage in risky behaviors, such as unprotected sex and frequent heavy drinking (Harder, et al., 2019).

It is possible that many people who disseminate private images do so without the conscious or direct intent to harm. In one study, 79 percent of participants who had shared images nonconsensually said they had sent them to friends and that they did not intend to hurt the victim (Eaton, et al., 2017). Sharing unsolicited and unwanted sexual images with friends may be understood as “a way of reaching out for collective meaning-making in an attempt to cope with something shocking” [7]. More generally, studies have found that the most common reasons people give for disseminating private sexual images are that they “didn’t think it was a big deal,” “as a joke” (Clancy, et al., 2019) or “for fun” and to “show off” (Barrense-Dias, et al., 2020). In one study, few of the victims (15 percent) and none of the people who shared images identified “causing harm” as their main motivation (Walker, et al., 2019). Still, it is possible that even anonymous survey participants are unable or unwilling to admit that they intentionally caused harm. To gain a better understanding of what committing image-based abuse feels like in hindsight, we analyze statements in a different context: a police investigation. This confrontation with authority provides a unique opportunity to investigate how image-sharers manage shame.

---

**Shame management: From deflection to redemption**

As Scheff explains, “[s]hame is the premier social emotion” [8] as shame is not only the feeling of having done a bad thing but also of being a bad person. Shame is thus a feeling of looking at oneself through the eyes of others and finding oneself to be a failure (S. Ahmed, 2014). Everyday interactions are centered around minimizing feelings of shame (Goffman, 1990, 1955), but shame is also “a key component of conscience, the moral sense: it signals moral transgression even without thoughts or words. Shame is our moral gyroscope” [9]. This raises a question: Do people who transgress moral boundaries not feel shame at all, or do they have different “moral gyroscopes”? According to the concept of neutralization, which criminologists developed in response to subcultural theories, committing an act society defines as “criminal” necessarily provokes shame, but offenders are likely to “neutralize” those feelings rather than acknowledge them (Sykes and Matza, 1957). The typical neutralization strategies include: denying responsibility or injury, claiming the victim deserved it, critiquing the ones judging their actions, or claiming to act for a greater good. Neutralizations are also common outside the context of crime; indeed they are tools everyone uses to deflect the shame of having done something bad (Maruna and Copes, 2005).

Neutralizations allow people to do bad things and displaced shame can alienate a person from both peers and oneself. However, the acknowledgment of shame can bind a person closer to others (E. Ahmed and Braithwaite, 2004). As Scheff explains: “Acknowledged shame, it seems, could be the glue that holds relationships and societies together and unacknowledged shame the force that tears them apart” [10]. By acknowledging shame, people can reaffirm that they believe in the same ideals as their community. S. Ahmed explains: “In showing my shame in my failure to live up to a social ideal, I come closer to that which I have been exposed as failing” [11]. Probyn similarly points out that shame is productive because acknowledging shame entails an adaptive self-reflexivity: “Feeling shame produces a new sense of self even if it is only momentary; it produces a profound reflection on the self.” [12].

S. Ahmed (2014) and Probyn, et al. (2019) draw on Braithwaite’s (1989) notion of reintegrative shaming, which suggests that shame can “work for you” if it is acknowledged and managed in “healthy, helpful” ways [13]. Braithwaite stresses that people who have done harm may be welcomed back into communities if they acknowledge and repair that harm. Restorative justice processes have “the explicit aim of undermining offender neutralizations” [14] and stress that the acknowledgement of shame is an important part of the healing process for victims and communities.

In this paper, we build on theories of shame and restorative justice by using narrative analysis to suggest that while people who commit image-based abuse commonly use neutralizations, they are not all as remorseless and irredeemable as the qualitative literature insists. When police ask that suspects explain and account for their actions,
shame has to be managed, which typically takes two forms: deflecting and neutralizing shame or acknowledging shame and reaffirming social expectations. In interrogations — as well as in everyday life — several shame management tactics such as apologies and excuses often coexist (Maruna and Copes, 2005). It is thus equally important to describe how people minimize their responsibility and victim-blame as it is to notice the moments in which they admit to having done a bad thing and commit to doing better in the future (Braithwaite, 2000). Analyzing how people who have shared images manage shame in different ways offers a more nuanced conceptualization of this form of abuse and suggests new interventions based on restorative justice.

Narratives in police cases

We use police cases to understand the nuances of how people manage shame after having committed image-based abuse. These cases offer considerable detail about how people describe their actions when caught and convicted. In narrative criminology, stories are valuable data because they provide evidence of how offenders both explain their actions and work to situate morals and identities in relation to those acts (Presser, 2009). An attention to narrative in criminology thus “prods us to view crime as an aspect and a product of human actors’ ongoing project of meaning-making” [15]. Take, for example, the convicted boyband-singer in the introduction: in his narrative, he describes his actions as the result of a general carelessness using digital media and he distances himself “as a person” from that act. He takes full responsibility for his past actions and thereby reinstates his present self in the social ideal as a caring individual. Narrative analysis would interpret this as “putting shame to work” by using it to reintegrate a better self in the future (Maruna and Ramsden, 2004). However, if the singer had instead explained his actions as justified by something the victim had done to him, then he would be describing himself as reactive rather than responsible. A narrative analysis would interpret this lack of personal agency as a neutralization, specifically through the strategy of victim blaming.

Our data is from a significantly different context than the existing qualitative research on image-based abuse described in the previous section. Unlike Web sites dedicated to nonconsensual sexual image-sharing, which do not distinguish between misogynistic fantasies and actual criminal image-sharing, our set of police cases describes verified incidents of image-based abuse. The stories posted on abusive Web sites are intended for an audience of like-minded male peers seeking sexual gratification; in contrast, in a police interrogation, people are facing an authoritative institution that is denouncing their actions. Feelings of shame are especially likely to surface in this context. As S. Ahmed explains, “In shame, more than my action is at stake: the badness of an action is transferred to me, such that I feel myself to be bad and to have been ‘found’ or ‘found out’ as bad by others” [16]. By documenting a high-stakes interaction, police cases provide a unique opportunity to analyze how people who have committed image-based abuse manage shame. Although previous research has analyzed media coverage of one person’s apologies in an image-based abuse case (Hasinoff, 2017), this is the first article to draw directly on police data.

How to do research with police cases: Methods and ethics

Our data is a set of 34 recent Danish police cases that were prosecuted and convicted under the law prohibiting the distribution of private images or messages. A police case is a bundle of documents that trace a criminal investigation from the report of a potential crime until the case is solved and the offender is sentenced in a court of law. The files typically detail where, how, and when images were shared, and summarize interviews with the victim(s) and witness(es) as well as offender interrogations. Some files also include correspondence between the offender and victim, visual evidence of image-sharing, and/or assessments of the offender from other authorities such as doctors, psychologists, or social workers.

In our set of cases [17], all the victims were between 18 and 30 years old (21 on average) while the age of offenders ranged from the early teens to middle age (averaging 26.5 years old). Only a few of the offenders — but all of the victims — were female. In 22 cases (65 percent), the victim and offender had had a previous heterosexual relationship, either online or in-person; some had lived together and had joint custody over their children. In the remaining 12 cases, half of the victims were abused by a friend or acquaintance and in the other half the offender was a stranger. While it is possible that some people were falsely convicted, our goal is not to determine guilt but to examine how they manage shame when confronted with an accusation about their behavior.
We analyzed the cases narratively (Sandberg, 2010), by focusing on the way people’s stories connect motives, emotions, and actions over time (Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2017). We concentrated on passages in the case files in which people who had shared images explained themselves; primarily to the police during interrogations and sometimes to other people, including the victim or bystanders, in other evidence documents. We mostly had access to police officers’ summaries of these statements, thus the words and perspectives are filtered through the official reports. We also cannot analyze emotional cues that might have been visible in an interview (Presser, 2009); as S. Ahmed notes, shame “burns on the surface of bodies that are presented to others” (18). Further, people who have committed image-based abuse might not accurately describe how these crimes have happened (Sandberg, 2010), and we cannot know if their expressions of shame are sincere or not. However, as S. Ahmed (2014) points out, an apology is performative in the sense that it can carry meaning and can provoke action regardless of the (lack of) “true” feelings behind it. Narratives thus provide important insights into the different emotions people express as they make sense of themselves and their actions in retrospect.

We classified the cases according to whether the person ultimately pled guilty or not and coded both the temporal events and what moral or “take-away” people attributed to their stories. We coded who or what the people who shared images blamed for their actions, including the roles that they assigned to victims, known others (such as friends), unknown others (such as hackers), and any abstract circumstances that they said influenced their behavior, such as the effect of technology on their everyday life. We also coded their statements for which emotions they said motivated their actions, including negative emotions (such as jealousy, hatred, or frustration), positive emotions (such as love, recognition, or excitement), and relatively neutral emotions (such as boredom, carelessness, prankishness).

Danish State Police granted access to case files based on approval from the Danish Data Protection Agency and the University of Copenhagen (journal # 514-0002/17-2000). Regulations in Denmark allow researchers to analyze data from terminated cases for scientific purposes under the condition that researchers do not publish or use any information that identifies individual people in the cases. This is to protect the confidentiality of the people involved but unfortunately also meant that we could not contact them to seek their consent. Instead, we have completely anonymized the cases by having the first author (who had the security clearance to view the case files) alter any specific or potentially identifiable details in the cases (Markham, 2012). For example, a case about images of a woman in a bikini being nonconsensually shared on Facebook might be presented here as images of a woman in a towel being shared on Reddit.

Analysis: Stories of deflection, victim blaming, and redemption

We find that stories about committing image-based abuse either deflect shame, shame victims, or acknowledge shame; below we discuss each type of story in turn. To present an overview, Figure 1 shows the distribution of the three main narratives in our data.
Figure 1: Image-based abuse cases classified according to pleas and shame-management strategies (N=34).

Though all the cases in our set were convicted as image-based sexual abuse, the first group (32 percent) of cases features “not guilty”-pleas and stories that deflect and neutralize shame by denying responsibility or injury. The second group of stories, 24 percent of the cases, neutralizes actions by blaming them on the victim’s behavior. The stories in the first two groups seem to align with previous findings in qualitative research. However, our final group of stories, 44 percent of the cases, offers a significant departure: these stories are about pleading guilty to image-based sexual abuse, acknowledging shame, and telling redemption stories about making better choices in the future.

Deflecting shame by denying responsibility or injury

Around one-third of the people who have committed image-based abuse in our set of cases plead “not guilty” and deflect shame through neutralization strategies of denial. Because “sexual offender” is a shameful identity, some completely refuse to be associated with the label. For example, Morten states squarely: “I would never do such a thing.” Similarly, Jonas distances himself from the headlines about image-based sexual abuse:

He explains that he didn’t share the images and hasn’t heard about [a group sharing images like that]. He says someone must have hacked his account, because he has had issues with spam recently. He has heard about revenge porn in the news, but he doesn’t know anybody who would do something like that. (Jonas)

Both Morten and Jonas are deflecting the shame associated with being an (image-based) sexual abuser by denying their involvement. However, most of the people who deflect shame use more specific neutralization techniques: denying their responsibility for doing harm or denying that their actions caused any harm (Maruna and Copes, 2005).

People who plead “not guilty” often deny responsibility by viewing themselves “as acted upon, rather than acting” [19]. For example, Frederik explains that the image-sharing happened through forces outside his control, and he positions himself as a victim as well:

He explains that he and the victim had never really been an item, just friends with benefits. They had both been sending dirty pictures and he just kept the footage. He had forgotten all about it afterwards, but the pictures were stored on his phone, which lots of people had access to. His codes weren’t so clever and he expected that he had all kinds of viruses too. He didn’t have any feelings for the victim so he would just let the guys from his dorm write her whatever, because they thought it was fun. He says the whole experience was really humiliating for both himself and the victim. (Frederik)

Frederik’s narrative includes a number of different explanations, and in each he plays a minor role. Frederik’s story deflects his responsibility for harm by positioning himself as innocently negligent in his use of digital technologies and his oversight of his friends. Frederik does not take on any shame for being careless with his phone or towards the victim; instead, he feels that the images being spread are shaming him.

Other people affirm that they shared images but deny the harm of their particular actions. In Henry’s story, he claims that he published the images by accident and that his act was not harmful:

He explains that he uploaded the images by mistake when he was making a Web site for a client. He says the images are only recognizable to the victim herself, and he had thought she looked good in them and meant her no harm. (Henry)
In this explanation, Henry says that the image sharing was not intended to — and could not — harm the victim because nobody could recognize her. In the framework of neutralization theory, Henry is deflecting shame by denying both responsibility and injury.

**Blaming the victim**

In almost a quarter of all cases, people who committed image-based abuse assign the primary blame to the victim, consistent with the neutralization technique of “denial of the victim.” In image-based abuse cases, this typically manifests in claims that image-sharing was an act of justified retaliation against the victim. Lars, for example, attributes all the blame to the younger woman he had a sexual relationship with when he was her employer. Lars knowingly exploited the fact that the victim was depending on him and when she ended the relationship, he felt entitled to distribute images of her:

He says that she had cut off contact abruptly and one day he heard that she was getting engaged to someone else. She hadn’t told him anything and it really got to him. He got angry and desperate. He figured people ought to know about it so he made a post with her nude images and distributed links to her fiancé, her new boss, and her family. (Lars)

Even though Lars pleads guilty to distributing the images, he expresses no shame for his actions anywhere in the file. Instead, he blames his victim for letting him down and he believes that she should be ashamed of her actions, not him. In this way, Lars can draw upon dominant discourses shaming women who have experienced sexual assault (Probyn, et al., 2019) and blaming female sexters for image-based abuse (Karaian, 2012; Hasinoff, 2015). Lars’ case, along with other victim-blamers who plead “not-guilty,” illustrates and confirms findings from studies of Web sites dedicated to nonconsensual sharing of images: the image-sharer is unrepentant and feels entitled to use digital images as a weapon against a woman he believes has wronged him.

At the same time, other people in our data set maintain their victim-blaming as an explanation for their actions but also acknowledge some shame and responsibility. For example, consider Mads’ case, which is similar to Lars’ in some ways: both men were emotionally abusive (and Mads physically abused his victim as well), and in both cases the victim was trapped in the relationship for a number of years. Both Mads and Lars express their entitlement to harm and control their victims. By the end of his case, however, Mads modifies that explanation:

He says that she had been spreading ugly rumors about him and that people told him how she had been trying to get back with her stupid ex for a while. He had made an escort ad with images of her and added juicy pictures he found in other ads that sold sex online. He is ashamed that he distributed that ad. He regrets doing it and is concerned about the trial. (Mads)

As his court day grows near, Mads begins expressing a new narrative in which he positions himself as being ashamed of his actions. Looking back, he starts to see that even if the victim was cheating on him, he was at fault for shaming her and he feels bad about those actions. From his perspective, they were both wrong. By the conclusion of this case, Mads is telling two stories about himself: his past self, who felt justified and entitled to hurt his girlfriend because she had hurt him, and his present self, who would not act that way again. It is important to note that even though Mads specifically mentions that he feels ashamed, he seems mainly to regret his actions because they mean that he is facing a criminal conviction. As S. Ahmed (2014) points out, expressions of regret should not be conflated with an apology, because regretting consequences does not necessarily entail the self-reflection and responsibility of shame.

While Mads is mixing victim-blaming with regretting the consequences he is now facing, Sam blames his victim but expresses some shame about what he did as well:

He explains that he made a post with images of her skinny-dipping and uploaded it to the intranet of her work because he heard she was looking for a new boyfriend. She had shared the code with him and he wanted to nag her. He is now aware that he probably shouldn’t
Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse

have accessed her account, and he has started therapy to move on.
(Sam)

Sam repeatedly exploited the fact that the victim had shared her password with him by uploading nude images of her. While he still refers to her behavior as an excuse for his actions, his statements that he knew he was causing the victim harm, that he should not have done it, and his attempt to “move on” through therapy suggests that he feels shame. Sam’s story highlights that many people may need professional support in order to “re-story themselves” and form identities as people who will not reoffend (E. Ahmed, et al., 2001).

Narrating redemption: Expressing shame and taking responsibility

We find that a third and final group of people (almost half of our cases) acknowledge that they committed harmful actions. These people all plead “guilty” and express that they were ashamed that they had shared images as a result of their anger with the victims, their need for respect from male peers, or their carelessness. What is particularly striking about this group of people is that they manage their shame by transforming their negative emotions into redemption stories about their better future selves. This finding suggests how some people who describe their actions as “careless” or “accidental” in surveys might manage their shame if confronted with their actions.

Liam and Rasmus tell stories about how they could not control their anger, and they express shame about getting carried away with their feelings towards the victim. Both position themselves as impulsive or having “snapped.”

He explains that he posted those images when he was completely out of it because he saw that she was seeing this older guy from Norway. He had been drinking heavily and he had lost it. It was a crime of passion, but he really is so sorry and he took the images down after 20 minutes. (Liam)

He says he realized that it was wrong to send those images and by now he had deleted everyone because he did realize she wouldn’t want him to send them out. He says he just had gotten so frustrated when he heard she was pregnant with her new man. (Rasmus)

Both of these stories are about the narrators’ feelings towards the victims, but instead of shaming victims for being with someone else, Liam and Rasmus are ashamed of how they reacted to the news that their ex-partners had moved on. They acknowledge that they should have been able to control their own feelings and that their victims’ actions do not diminish their own responsibility.

While Liam and Rasmus had trouble controlling negative feelings towards their victims, Frank and Jens express shame that they used intimate images to gain status among other men online or off-line.

The gamer forum he sold the images in had so many members, so he didn’t think twice about sharing. It was a kind of dick-y crowd, he just wanted to get a rep with these guys. He wasn’t even thinking about the victim then — it might as well have been an image of someone else. But he says it really was a stupid thing to do and that he wouldn’t ever do it again. (Frank)

He took those pictures of her getting dressed as a joke — a bad joke, he says he understands now. He was trying to impress his mates by saying that he had “been there, done that.” He shouldn’t have been bragging about something like that and he feels bad about it. He later tried to lie about it because he was afraid of what people would think of him. The thought that he might be accused of sexual abuse made him sick to his stomach and it had been on his mind every day since. Everybody’s talking about it and no one listens to his side of things. He’s been missing work and thinking about how tough it must be for the victim. (Jens)
Frank’s and Jens’ cases illustrate the misogynistic homosocial cultures described in the literature on both online and off-line communities of men and boys who objectify women and girls to gain respect from their peers. Our findings add that, at least in the context of a police interrogation, some of these people can later express shame that they chose to harm someone in order to gain status with peers. In hindsight, they say they are ashamed of being “stupid” and making “bad jokes” to impress other men. However, Jens’ description of feeling “sickened” that people around him are accusing him of sexual abuse seems to indicate that he feels shame about being seen as a sex offender as much as he is ashamed of nonconsensually photographing his victim. In Goffman’s (1955) terms, Jens is experiencing a loss of face because he is being labelled as a sexual predator among his peers. Just like Morten and Jonas (who plead “not guilty”), Jens refuses to be stigmatized as an abuser. But the important difference is that Jens also empathizes with the victim and feels guilty about his actions.

Christian and Anders neither felt angry with their victims nor sought respect from their peers; instead, they both feel ashamed of their own carelessness.

He explains that the pictures were taken just for laughs, and it wasn’t anything he had given any thought to at all. He says that it was only for a few people to see and never meant to share. But the victim found them on the computer of one of his friends, so it came back to her that way. He later called the victim and apologized. (Christian)

While staying at home after a work injury, he had gotten so bored, needed excitement, and wasn’t thinking. He explains that he wasn’t meaning to harm anyone and he had seen other people trading the same pictures. By now he knows that it has hurt her to have those sensitive images spread around. It just happened so fast, and he can’t explain it, but now he regrets it and would never do it again. He says he has learned his lesson and that he stays off social media. (Anders)

In both of these narratives, the moral of the story is that even if sharing images nonconsensually was not meant to harm, both Christian and Anders feel ashamed of not anticipating that their actions would hurt the victims. In their stories they acknowledge their responsibility that something quick, thoughtless, and “fun” caused serious harm.

Discussion: From redemption stories to repair

Our findings suggest that although misogyny, abuse, and victim blaming are common, many stories about committing image-based abuse are also about acknowledging shame. Rather than stigmatizing people who have shared images nonconsensually, future interventions might therefore focus on helping them accept the guilt for their actions (Braithwaite, 1989), and future research might profitably investigate which conditions foster redemptive scripts. While there is no universal “redemption script” which is “appropriate or beneficial to every individual seeking to make a change in his or her life” [20], there are similarities among the different stories about pleading guilty and acknowledging shame. These scripts generally trace the narrators’ harmful acts back to feelings that they should have handled better. The narrators position themselves as being unable to control their need for revenge (over victims), needing acknowledgement (from peers), or wanting excitement. In these stories, image distribution is the result of “going too far” but crucially, the narrators’ admission of shame works to get them “back on the right track.” These stories manage shame by highlighting how to “make good” in the future (Maruna, 2001).

Some stories about image-based sexual abuse seem to focus on shame only when bystanders or the police make the narrator aware of the consequences of their actions, while other stories are about how the narrator quickly “snapped out of it” and tried to undo their actions. In our set of cases, some of the stories about acknowledging shame are also about offering different kinds of repair: for example, by deleting images from the Internet or their phone, by empathizing with the victim, or by apologizing to her directly. However, image-based abuse is not easily repaired: images can keep circulating and trust can be difficult to rebuild. We cannot tell from the information in the police cases if these attempts at repair helped their victims. As S. Ahmed...
points out: “We can stay open to hearing the claims of others, only if we assume that the act of speaking our shame does not undo the shame of what we speak” [21]. This means that telling a redemption story and acknowledging shame does not guarantee a victim’s or a community’s forgiveness. Further research is needed to examine whether and how shame can be transformed into meaningful apologies or other forms of repair for victims.

In order to design harm-reduction interventions targeting new digital offences, stakeholders might look to the restorative justice research and practice related to in-person sex crimes. While neutralizations are common, previous research indicates that people who have committed sexual violence can acknowledge shame for their actions. For example, one study of Reddit posts from people who had perpetrated rape found that many expressed shame, anger, and depression, directed at either their victims or themselves (Brennan, et al., 2018). Further, one study of apology letters from people who had committed rape found that while most did not initially accept responsibility, all of the people who participated in a one-year restorative justice process shifted their attitudes, such as by expressing empathy for the victim and acknowledging the harm they inflicted (Bletzer and Koss, 2012). Future research and policy initiatives are needed to investigate whether and how restorative justice processes could be appropriate to respond to the harm of digital sexual abuse.

Conclusion: Stories of digital harm

This article supports previous research that partner abuse, sexism, male bonding, and digital media are important factors in image-based abuse. In many of the cases in our set, we find evidence of objectification, shaming, and victim blaming, which supports claims that image-based sexual abuse offenders are “incapable of feeling remorse” [22] and caught in a “sexually deviant” online network of “ritualized sexual humiliation” [23]. Nonetheless, our research also indicates that many other stories of image-based sexual abuse are about acknowledging shame — at least when the audience is law enforcement authorities. Nearly half of the narratives in our set of cases are about being ashamed of nonconsensual sharing and taking on the responsibility for the harm caused, and some of these narrators also offer different repairs to their victims. Those stories confirm and expand on the survey findings that many people say they feel bad when they realize the harm they have caused by nonconsensually distributing images (Eaton, et al., 2017). Consistent with narrative criminology, we find that the “redemptive scripts” for image-based sexual abuse are stories about being ashamed of oneself and constructing a better, non-offending future self (Presser, 2003).

Stories about online abuse also point to the important role people assign to the Internet when they make sense of harm in hindsight. One of the common themes across the three groups of narratives in our data — and the popstar’s campaign video — is that these stories draw on popular discourses blaming digital media for social problems. In such narratives, technology can take on agency of its own and thereby neutralize the shame of image-based sexual abuse. For example, Frederik’s story attributes the nonconsensual sharing to his simple passwords and the virus on his phone, while Sam states that the victim had already given him access to her account by sharing her password. Other narratives fit technology into a redemption story; for example, Anders says that he will stop sharing images by abstaining from social media. In these stories, the Internet seems to absorb some of the shame of having committed image-based sexual abuse by shifting the focus from the harm-doer to the technology as a facilitator of harm. This type of story portrays the narrator as a thoughtless user of technology rather than as someone who intended to commit a crime. We suggest that narrative criminology could thus contribute to Internet research on other online crimes and abuses by helping to pinpoint how digital technologies are assigned agency when people manage shame about harming others online.

This paper highlights the complexity and internal contradictions in retrospective stories of image-based sexual abuse. The person who posts a violent and misogynistic comment on a Web site might later express remorse when he considers the impact of his actions. Another person who physically abuses his girlfriend and uses her images to maintain power might distance himself from his actions afterwards by framing them as occurring in a moment of rage and apologizing. Our findings indicate that viewing people who commit image-based abuse as remorseless and perpetually deviant offers a limited way of understanding, and thus responding to, this social problem. If people who nonconsensually share images are stigmatized as “lost causes,” the only solution may be to remove them from communities, treat them psychiatrically, and/or punish them harshly. In contrast, recognizing that telling stories about online abuse can help people acknowledge shame suggests that alternative responses and integrative dialogue may be preferable.
About the authors

**Sidsel K. Harder** is a sociologist researching sexual images in pornography, sexting and image-based sexual abuse. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the Department of Sociology at University of Copenhagen and has previously published on sexuality, drugs and nightlife.

E-mail: skh [at] soc [dot] ku [dot] dk

**Amy A. Hasinoff** is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Colorado Denver. Her book, *Sexting panic: Rethinking criminalization, privacy, and consent* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), is about the well-intentioned but problematic responses to sexting in mass media, law, and education. Her research also appears in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and *Feminist Media Studies*.

E-mail: amy [dot] hasinoff [at] ucdenver [dot] edu

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Danish National Police, especially the National Cyber Crime Center for providing access to the data, and the American Council of Learned Societies and the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg for their contributions to this project.

Notes

4. We use the term “offender” when referring to previous literature or police data but otherwise limit our use of the term to avoid stigmatization (Branham, 2019).
7. Rasmussen and Søndergaard, 2020, p. 87.
The age and gender distribution is described in general terms in order to protect confidentiality.


Mortreux, et al., 2019, p. 22.

Henry and Flynn, 2019, p. 1,946.

References


doi: [https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429467608](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429467608), accessed 29 December 2020.


doi: [https://doi.org/10.1086/655355](https://doi.org/10.1086/655355), accessed 29 December 2020.

S. Maruna and D. Ramsden, 2004. “Living to tell the tale: Redemption narratives, shame management, and offender
Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse


Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse


---

**Editorial history**

Received 25 February 2021; accepted 3 March 2021.

---

This paper is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Ashamed of shaming? Stories of managing, deflecting, and acknowledging shame after committing image-based sexual abuse
by Sidsel K. Harder and Amy A. Hasinoff.
doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11671](http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11671)