The Malevolent Side of Revenge Porn Proclivity: Dark Personality Traits and Sexist Ideology

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a novel study, exploring a form of technology facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) known as revenge porn. Despite its emerging prevalence, little is known about the characteristics of revenge porn perpetrators. In the current study, a revenge porn proclivity scale was devised to examine participants’ behavioural propensity to engage in revenge porn. One hundred adults, aged 18-54, were recruited online from a community sample. The correlational relationship between revenge porn proclivity and the self-reported endorsement of the Dark Triad, sadism, and ambivalent sexism was examined. Additional proclivity subscales of revenge porn enjoyment and revenge porn approval were also created. The study’s main findings revealed a positive correlation between a greater behavioural propensity to engage in revenge porn and higher levels of the Dark Triad and ambivalent sexism. Moreover, endorsement of psychopathy was found to be the only Dark Triad trait that independently predicted revenge porn proclivity. The results suggest that perpetrators of revenge porn may have distinct personality profiles. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Ambivalent Sexism, Dark Triad, Nonconsensual Pornography, Proclivity, Revenge Porn, Sadism

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in modern technology have enabled public access to a breadth of knowledge, facilitated by widespread communication that can reach both national and international audiences (Taylor, Fritsch, & Liederbach, 2015). However, the integration of communication technologies in our daily lives and intimate relationships (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014) also provides additional opportunities for sexual exploitation and criminal victimization (Roberts, 2008). This is an emerging phenomenon of societal concern that has sparked research interest with a focus on the ethical dimension of technological advancement. The multidisciplinary domain of Technoethics is concerned with the study of moral, legal and social issues involving technology (Luppicini & Adell, 2008). One of these social and legal phenomena involving technology is that of ‘revenge porn,’ otherwise known as non-consensual pornography, currently sparking increasing media interest (BBC, 2016; Guardian, 2015). Whilst there exists a wealth of literature on perpetrators of traditional acts of sexual violence (Greathouse, Saunders, Matthews, Keller, & Miller, 2015), little is known of the characteristics of those who endorse and display revenge porn behaviour. An in-depth understanding of the psychological profiles of these individuals could benefit preventative and rehabilitative methods for reducing the prevalence of this crime (Gerhart, Ronan, Russ, & Seymour, 2013; Voller & Long, 2010). This paper examines the relationship between aversive personality traits and the behavioural propensity to engage in revenge porn behaviours.

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THE GROWING PROBLEM OF REVENGE PORN: ETHICAL AND LEGAL ISSUES

Revenge porn is the act of sharing intimate, sexually graphic images and/or videos of another person onto public online platforms (e.g. Facebook) without their consent (Burris, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014). These images are often either produced non-consensually (e.g. by means of surveillance or hacking) or consensually (e.g. by the victim in the context of either a private relationship or courtship) (Citron & Franks, 2014; Stroud & Henson, 2016). This is largely motivated by the malicious intent to harm and humiliate the victim, who is often the perpetrator’s previous romantic partner (Burris, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014). Not all acts are perpetrated for revenge, and can instead be committed as a means of blackmail, coercion, or for the enjoyment of causing torment upon others (Henry & Powell, 2016). For the purposes of this paper we will name all these acts revenge porn due to the intent behind the instigation of such events. However, the term non-consensual pornography is also frequently used in the literature to encompass all different facets of these behaviours (Citron & Franks, 2014).

Although revenge porn can affect individuals of all ages, sexuality and gender, it is predominantly perpetrated against, and severely negatively affects women (Citron & Franks, 2014; Poole, 2015; Salter & Crofts, 2015). Researchers have acknowledged that revenge porn reflects larger issues over women’s social and interpersonal status, and can be seen as a form of hostility towards female autonomy (Citron & Franks, 2014; Poole, 2015) and policing women’s sexuality, with large online communities (of males in their majority) enforcing the “bounds of appropriate femininity” by means of ridicule and harassment (Salter & Crofts, 2015, p.1). As Noah Berlatsky states: “the web has made it possible to crowdsource misogyny […] and stalking” (2013, www.digitalethics.org).

While most people would consider sharing intimate images of themselves or other people online, without their consent, unethical, there are certain processes at play that make the perpetrators rationalize the act. These processes make the act seem more acceptable, and in some cases justified; such as the culpability of the victim in creating the images in the first place, or the victim’s alleged infidelity against the perpetrator (Poole, 2015). Although these issues can, and do, affect men as well, it is female infidelity and display of sexuality that is punished and regulated to such a cruel degree (Poole, 2015).

The permanence and dissemination speed afforded by the internet can cause victims of revenge porn to endure great distress. This is often due to the difficulty in removing material published online, and also in preventing its re-distribution, due to legislation protecting free speech (Berlatsky, 2013; Dick et al., 2014). Furthermore, there are lucrative websites devoted to publishing revenge porn and displaying the victim’s personal information linking them to their social media accounts (Stroud, 2014), profiting from victims’ distress (Salter & Crofts, 2015). While these sites are protected under the Federal Communications Decency Act (1996; Berlatsky, 2013; Poole, 2015), where they cannot be prosecuted or held accountable for user-submitted content, the onus lies with the victim to sue websites requesting the names of the users in order to bring about lawsuits against them. Victims can seek (and have successfully sought) justice through tort law, suing for intentional infliction of emotional suffering (Citron & Franks, 2014). However, it is important to note that not all victims have the knowledge or financial resources to instigate civil suits against their perpetrators, and often, the confusion surrounding online harassment laws and lack of anonymity can act as a deterrent for both litigators and victims (Citron & Franks, 2014).

This severe lack of victim anonymity enables further harassment from others, both offline and online (Henry & Powell, 2015a). It is unsurprising that victims of revenge porn experience an array of negative effects, including the dissolution of relationships, problems with employment, and decreased self-esteem (Henry & Powell, 2015a). Some cases of revenge porn have even resulted in the victim committing suicide (Guardian, 2012; Independent, 2014).
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