

Persisting Concerns About Image Exposure Among Survivors of Image-Based Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Childhood

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Objective: Among survivors of image-based sexual exploitation and abuse, how many experienced persisting concerns about others encountering their sexual images? **Method:** Online self-administered questionnaire was used. A sample of 189 unique incidents of image-based sexual abuse or exploitation in childhood from 154 respondents ages 18–28 were gathered in a follow-up study to a previous national online survey about technology-facilitated abuse. **Results:** Twenty-six percent of the episodes generated high levels of persisting concern about possible unwanted exposure from the online availability of images. Among those who knew their image was publicly posted, 86% reported high levels of concern, but among the survivors confident that the images were not available online, only 7% had high levels of concern. There was also greater concern about exposure among survivors who experienced the abuse incident within the last 3 years. Abuse at the hands of other juveniles resulted in a similar level of concern as abuse by adults. **Conclusion:** The study highlights that some survivors of sexual image exploitation and abuse have persistent concerns about further image exposure to other audiences. Survivors with lower levels of persistent concern are typically those who do not believe the images are available online.

Clinical Impact Statement

When working with survivors of child sexual image abuse, clinicians may need to explore fears about who might see the images and how they might resurface. However, not all survivors have such acute concerns, so clinicians may need to be careful not to assume or trigger concerns, where they were not present.

Keywords: child pornography, technology-facilitated abuse, online abuse, internet crimes against children

Easy-to-use and widespread technologies to create and share images and videos have dramatically altered the dynamics of sexual abuse and exploitation. New kinds of offenses have appeared, like image sextortion, revenge pornography, and nonconsensual sexting (Strasburger et al., 2019). Sextortion means using the dissemination of received images to demand more images, sexual favors, or money. Revenge porn is when slighted romantic partners retaliate by sending out intimate images to humiliate their former partner. Nonconsensual sexting is a broader term referring to any sexual image of another person shared without permission.

Familiar kinds of offenses like intrafamily sexual abuse have been complicated and aggravated by the ability of offenders to create and disseminate visuals of their crimes (Martellozzo, 2019). In a national survey of young adults from 2021, 11% reported an episode of image-based sexual abuse during childhood (Finkelhor et al., 2022). It is

becoming a form of childhood sexual victimization that comprises an important portion of sexual abuse harm and one that has been shown to add considerably to a developmental burden resulting in health and well-being impairments (Finkelhor et al., 2024). Image abuse has been shown to be associated with posttraumatic stress disorder and related trauma symptoms (Bates, 2017; Kamal & Newman, 2016; McGlynn et al., 2021; Powell & Henry, 2019; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020).

One important aspect to these new image dynamics is the increased scope of victim exposure. When shared or posted on the internet, the images also can become a permanent record, which may possibly surface in unknown ways at unknown times.

In previous studies of image abuse, survivors have testified to the burden of not knowing who may have viewed or could view the images among their circle of acquaintances or contacts (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020;

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Huber, 2023). These concerns are amplified by an expanding technological environment where aggregation of information about people grows quickly and where online searches by friends, potential romantic partners, and employers are increasingly normative.

A strong theme in the literature on image abuse is that this vulnerability to ongoing and permanent exposure makes image abuse a particularly harmful form of sexual offense (Huber, 2023; McGlynn et al., 2021). Indeed, in a study of online sexual abuse, episodes involving image abuse were uniquely high in emotional impact when compared to other types of technology-facilitated sexual abuse (Finkelhor et al., 2023).

The possibilities for negative impact stem from various elements of the abuse dynamics (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018): the betrayal and violation of the images being produced or shared without consent; the envisioning of the large number of people who might see or possess the images and the long-term duration of this vulnerability; the possibility that the images could affect their future in the form of employment, education, or romantic relationships; and the frustration of trying to obtain justice or remediation for the violation and damage.

Nonetheless, image abuse and exploitation take various dynamics that may differentially affect their impact. Much of the image abuse literature focuses on cases of adult perpetrators who memorialize their hands-on offenses against children with images. Some adults groom and manipulate youth to obtain images from them online without ever meeting. But image abuse also includes large numbers of episodes that occur at the hands of peers and other juveniles, sometimes called youth-produced images (Finkelhor et al., 2022). This can occur as part of bullying or other malicious motives. In addition to adult or juvenile offenders who nonconsensually take or coerce images of victims, other image abuse starts with the initial willing sharing of images with friends or romantic partners who then misuse them in malicious, nonconsensual ways. These offenses are sometimes referred to with terms like sextortion, revenge porn, or nonconsensual sexting. Although youth self-made and voluntarily shared sexual images are illegal by virtue of being a sexual image of a minor, there are recommendations to only consider such images exploitative when shared with impermissible adult partners or in a commercial transaction (Strasburger et al., 2019).

Such specific details of the episode dynamics may influence the negative impact. For example, much of the literature asserts that anxieties that the images can be seen by others at any time are a key element to the intensity and durability of the harm. This is consistent with the literature on persistent worries and their association to trauma (Michael et al., 2005). But not all image abuse ends up in general online circulation. If victims believe that the abusive image is not generally available or has had limited distribution, they may feel differently.

Little previous research has been conducted with survivors of image abuse and their concerns about persisting exposure. None have compared relative impact. One study of 150 survivors found that 64% worried about someone seeing their childhood images and recognizing them (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017), but not all were concerned. However, this sample was recruited specifically from organizations working with self-identified survivors and had a majority of participants older than age 30 and thus representative of an era before the rise of widespread youth image sharing. Other studies have small samples of recruited survivors (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Huber, 2023).

The sample for this study was recruited from a nationally representative online survey panel. This study addresses two important research questions: (1) What proportion of a diverse representative sample of abusive image survivors had a high level of concern about the possible embarrassing exposure of their sexual images to additional people? (2) What features of the image-based abuse episode contributed to higher or lower levels of concerns?

Ideally, we might want to examine the relationship of concern about exposure with measures of lasting trauma. But with these data, we are presuming that concern and anxiety about additional exposures are unpleasant and painful in themselves and thus a harm even without a measure of lasting trauma.

Method

The study was conducted using the nationally representative KnowledgePanel (KP). KP is a sample that the survey firm Ipsos has recruited via address-based sampling, from mail addresses obtained from national universal address databases. This systematic selection process makes the panel more representative than typical online recruitment. Panel members were profiled through KP's Core Profile Survey of demographic attributes. Once deemed eligible, panel participants were invited to participate in regular online surveys. Digital devices were provided to any recruited sample members who lacked devices to participate (Ipsos, n.d.). The KP panelists in the age range 18–28 years old ($n = 13,884$) were invited to participate in the current survey. This age range was chosen to cover a generation that grew up with digital devices and apps that facilitate the nonconsensual taking and sharing of images. Participants could receive points that entitled them to various awards, consistent with all KP surveys, although the researchers themselves paid no monetary incentives. In total, 2,639 panel members participated by the end of data collection, with an overall participation rate of 20%. The study was approved and overseen by the human subjects review board of the University of New Hampshire.

Of the 2,639 completed surveys, 1,215 endorsed one or more of the screening questions about possible online victimizations. For those who endorsed multiple screeners, the survey gathered follow-up information on two screeners, prioritizing episode types that were of less frequent occurrence in the sample overall, as determined by a survey pretest. All available KP panelists aged 18–28 were invited to participate in the study. The final participating sample was somewhat older ($M = 24.8$, $SD = 2.76$), and there were more female (68.1%) compared to the U.S. population of 18- to 28-year-olds. Poststratification weights were developed to align respondent demographic distributions with U.S. population benchmarks and also to adjust for nonresponse.

A follow-up survey was conducted to get additional information about postvictimization experiences from respondents with image-based abuse. Three hundred fifty-seven of the original survey respondents with image-based abuse experiences (the rest had nonimage online abuse like grooming or solicitation) were invited to participate in a short (12-min) follow-up survey. Of these, 185 completed the questionnaire in June–August 2022, but only 154 respondents qualified for inclusion (after excluding experiences that were in adulthood not childhood), resulting in an overall response rate of 45% of the recruited survivors. On variables related to gender, age, race, education, screener endorsement, and perpetrator identity, there were no significant differences between the final

sample and those originally designated for follow-up. The analysis was based on 189 incidents occurring to the 154 respondents. Of these incidents, 74.5% occurred to women, and 56.3% occurred to heterosexuals; considering age, 10.6% occurred to respondents currently 18–20 years old, 23.8% to respondents currently 21–23 years old, 34.9% to respondents currently 24–26 years old, and 30.7% to respondents currently 27–28 years old.

Measures

The study operationalized several distinct online offenses in which an image might be involved (additional details available in Finkelhor et al., 2022). Although the questions were about lifetime experiences, subsequent questions about age of occurrence allowed us to select only episodes before the age of 18.

Nonconsensual Sexual Image Sharing

“Has someone ever *shared with other people* a sexual picture or video of you *without your permission*?”

Nonconsensual Sexual Image Taking

“Has someone ever *taken or made* a sexual picture or video of you *without your permission*?” This was meant to include images of the child or youth being abused or when the victim was unconscious, intoxicated, distracted, or unable to consent. It could include so-called “deepfake” images where a victim’s head or likeness was imposed on a sexual image of someone else.

Forced Image Recruitment

“Has someone ever *threatened, tried to force you, or strongly pressured you to provide* sexual pictures or videos online or through a cell phone?” This was meant to include episodes of someone trying to coerce images when the victim was unwilling or reluctant. It could include a boyfriend who pressured or badgered a victim about providing an image. Episodes were only included if the victim shared an image with the perpetrator(s).

Older Partner Voluntary

“Did you have intimate sexual conversations or share sexual pictures or videos (online or through a cell phone), even if you wanted to, *with a person who was 5 or more years older than you*?” This was meant to capture voluntary sexual interactions with an older partner that are nonetheless criminal and outlawed by statutory sex crime laws. The term “voluntary” is not meant to imply consent or absence of harm but the reality that in some sexual abuse dynamics the interaction is perceived by the victim as “wanted.” True rates of sexual abuse will be undercounted if all the questions ask only about “unwanted” experiences. These dynamics are frequently referenced in discussions of child sexual abuse material production, and prevention and detection will be less effective without the discussion of such episodes.

Commercial Sex Online

Have you done any of the following things over the Internet or a cell phone (including texting) *in exchange for money, drugs, or*

other valuable items? Sexual talk; Making, sending, or posting sexual pictures or videos of yourself; Any other sexual activity.

This included youth who used technology to earn money or get valuables by providing sexual services. Episodes were only included in the offense sample if an image, video, or live online performance was shared.

Persisting Concern

The main outcome variable is what we are calling persisting concern, an anxiety in the present moment of adulthood that the abused images could affect their life on four possible dimensions. This is not necessarily a trauma measure, but it is a sign of stress and discomfort that is part of the pathway from the image abuse to possible trauma. It also pertains to a specific episode, so it can be better correlated with episode characteristics. Three questions were asked in this format. “How concerned are you *currently* about whether friends or acquaintances (recent or future romantic partner; present or future employer) might learn about the pictures or videos?” A fourth question was asked in this format: “How concerned are you *currently* about possibly meeting people who have seen the pictures or videos?”

Information collected about survivors included their gender and age at victimization. Follow-up questions about perpetrators concerned their gender and their relationship. Adult perpetrators were defined as those suspected or known to be age 18 or older.

An episode-level file was created resulting in 189 unique incidents of image-based sexual abuse or exploitation from 154 respondents. In cases where there were missing data, these were coded as do not know or missing. The primary variable of interest, concern, was coded as dichotomous (somewhat/very concerned = high concern; a little/not at all/no response = low concern).

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata/SE 17.0. Survey weights were applied in all analyses to adjust for age, gender, and nonresponse. Pearson’s chi-square (χ^2) tests were used to analyze different rates of concern between episode and victim characteristics.

Results

The image abuse episodes represented in this sample were diverse: 38.8% were originally youth self-produced images that were later nonconsensually shared by an adult (19.2%) or another youth (19.6%). Another 31.1% were images that were taken nonconsensually by another youth (17.2%) or by an adult (13.9%). A separate 30.2% were images that were exploitative because they were shared illegally with an adult (21.6%) or in exchange for money (8.6%).

Table 1 shows the persistence of current concerns among survivors about images being learned about by four groups of people: current friends and acquaintances, romantic partners, employers, or future generic contacts. The concern levels were largely equivalent across categories: 22%–23% said that they were very concerned or somewhat concerned about the various groups of people learning about the images. Conversely, about three quarters responded that they were not at all or just a little concerned about each group finding out. To encompass those who were very or somewhat concerned, we created a variable that included any respondent who was very or somewhat

Table 1
Current Concern About Pictures or Videos (n = 189)

How concerned are you currently that (___) will learn about pictures or videos?	Weighted % (SE)			
	Friend or acquaintance	Recent or future romantic partner	Present or future employer	Someone you will meet
Very concerned	18.0 (4.3)	17.3 (4.3)	12.8 (3.7)	16.3 (4.0)
Somewhat concerned	5.0 (2.2)	5.0 (2.2)	9.8 (3.3)	5.8 (2.7)
A little concerned	13.3 (3.3)	8.8 (3.0)	10.3 (3.0)	10.7 (2.9)
Not at all concerned	63.8 (5.1)	68.9 (5.0)	67.2 (5.0)	67.3 (4.9)

Note. SE = standard error.

concerned about any type of group exposure, labeled “high level of concern,” which totaled 26.1% of episodes (Table 2).

The variable most strongly associated with being concerned was whether the survivor was aware that the images were in a public place on the internet where they could be seen (Table 3). Among those who knew that their image was publicly posted, 85.8% reported high levels of concern. Among those 42.4% who believed their image was not posted, only 6.9% were highly concerned. Because belief that the image(s) had not been posted was so strongly associated with alleviated concern, we removed those episodes from additional analyses to identify factors associated with concern among those who believed the image had been or might be posted. This represented 105 episodes with 41.1% reporting a high level of current concern.

The only other variable significantly associated with high current concern among this group (Table 4) was time elapsed since victimization ($p < .002$). Survivors who were only 3 years removed or less from the episode had higher levels of concern (73.3%) compared to those who were victimized more than 3 years ago (29.3%). However, a small group ($n = 8$) who were 13–15 years distant from the episode also had high levels of concern (89.1%).

Beyond this, no other specific features of the image abuse episode were significantly different between the low- and high-concern groups. This was a relatively small sample; however, some features appeared possibly associated with lower concern, even though the two concern groups were not significantly different: images voluntarily provided to adults who did not engage in nonconsensual sharing were lower (19.4%) and episodes where the perpetrator was a friend or relative (but not an intimate partner) were lower (21.6%).

Discussion

Some survivors of childhood image exploitation and abuse do experience persisting concerns into adulthood about others’ viewing

Table 2
Current Concern About Pictures or Videos, Low or High (n = 189)

Current concern level	Weighted % (SE)
Low concern ($n = 142$)	73.9 (4.7)
High concern ($n = 47$)	26.1 (4.7)

Note. SE = standard error.

or finding out about these images. Those attesting to being very or somewhat concerned comprised one quarter of the survivors. These concerns about discovery applied to friends, future acquaintances, romantic partners, and employers to an equal degree. None of the groups was particularly more salient than the others.

Clearly, not all survivors harbored strong current concerns. The most protective feature for survivors was believing that the images were not available in a publicly accessible venue. This could be, for example, because the perpetrator of a nonconsensually taken image did not disseminate it to the survivor’s knowledge, or the image was provided voluntarily to an adult acquaintance whom the survivor trusted.

Overall, no other specific features of the image abuse episode were statistically significant in their association with concerns. But this was a relatively small sample, and some other features were suggested even though not reaching statistical significance, meaning they might be candidates to examine in larger studies. Images voluntarily provided to adults without nonconsensual sharing had a lower level of concern. Friend or relative perpetrators had lower levels of concern compared to intimate partners. Interestingly, the concerns related to juvenile perpetrators were no less than concerns about adult perpetrators, so it cannot be presumed that adult-involved episodes generate more concern about further exposure to other audiences. This finding is supported by other analyses from the study showing that youth and adult perpetrators generate equivalent negative emotional impacts (Finkelhor et al., 2023).

The only previous study for comparison was the Canadian Centre study of 150 childhood image survivors. That study found 67% with high concern about further exposure, a higher rate than the present study, likely because the sample was recruited from abuse intervention organizations, where survivors with more concerns and more broadly disseminated images may have sought help. Representative samples of abuse like ours tend in general to identify a more diverse set of dynamics including fewer highly impacted victims. That does not imply that image exploitation and abuse are less consequential harms than people might imagine just that the range of episodes is more varied. Future research, prevention, and intervention need to take account of this diversity in dynamics.

In response to the problem of persistent vulnerability of image-based sexual abuse, many policies and programs for mitigation and prevention of harm are being conceptualized, most in early stages of development. For example, technology companies have been experimenting with software to automatically detect and interrupt the transmission of sexual images of minors on their platforms and among their users (Associated Press, 2021). Technology is also

Table 3
Current Concern Level by Posting Status (n = 189)

Were any of the pictures or videos ever posted to a public place on the internet, somewhere where anyone might be able to find them?	Weighted % (SE) of row category	
	Low concern (n = 142)	High concern (n = 47)
Yes, I know they were posted. (n = 19)	14.2 (10.1)	85.8 (10.1)
I think they were posted. (n = 10)	46.8 (20.0)	53.2 (20.0)
I do not know. (n = 76)	82.3 (5.1)	17.7 (5.1)
No, they were not posted. (n = 83)	93.1 (3.2)	6.9 (3.2)
Design-based chi-square	$F(3, 525) = 14.62, p < .001$	

Note. SE = standard error.

being used to locate and remove images that survivors want deleted. A program called “Take It Down” provides software that allows image abuse survivors to make digitally “hashed” replicas of the image that can be used to flag their circulation and then be interrupted or removed by participating digital platforms (Magid, 2023). The findings from this study were that survivors had fewer persisting concerns if they believed the images were not in circulation, and this suggests that efforts to remove images and halt their circulation could have a very positive impact on survivors’ distress.

Educational programs have been created and widely disseminated to try to discourage minors from making and sharing sexual images (World Health Organization et al., 2022). A common theme in these programs is that shared sexual images can be nonconsensually distributed and end up being viewed by unanticipated sources, such as employers or college admission committees. It is not clear whether such warnings are effective in the face of what appears to be changing social norms that countenance image sharing as part of

romance and relationship building (Döring, 2014; Symons et al., 2018). No outcome studies of educational messages about image sharing are known at this time (World Health Organization et al., 2022). Some prevention educators have recommended a harm reduction approach to sexual image sharing. This includes, for example, suggestions to sexting youth not to include the face or other clearly identifying features in their images (Döring, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Other programs are being developed to address some of the specific traumatic symptoms that may be present for survivors of image abuse, including programs that are available for autonomous use online (Bucci et al., 2023).

The literature on the therapeutic response to survivors of image abuse is not well-developed. In one survey (Howley et al., 2014), clinicians for survivors emphasized destigmatizing the image abuse by a willingness to talk about it and information about the commonality of such experiences. The report also advocated work with parents, whose distress may prompt them to blame victims.

Table 4
Incident Dynamics by Level of Current Concern Among Possibly Posted Image Episodes (n = 105)

Episode characteristic	Low concern (n = 67)	High concern (n = 38)	F statistic	p
	Weighted % (SE) of row category			
Image abuse type			(2, 195) = 2.28	.107
Self-produced (n = 41)	44.1 (10.9)	55.9 (10.9)		
Taken or made (n = 32)	58.7 (12.0)	41.3 (12.0)		
Voluntary with adult perp (n = 30)	80.6 (9.3)	19.4 (9.3)		
Victim gender			(1, 104) = .57	.478
Male (n = 13)	69.1 (14.7)	30.9 (14.7)		
Female (n = 87)	55.9 (7.9)	44.1 (7.9)		
Other (n = 5)	57.7 (22.5)	42.3 (22.5)		
Perp relationship			(4, 392) = .57	.676
Online (n = 3)	36.6 (28.6)	63.4 (29.6)		
Intimate partner (n = 35)	54.6 (13.7)	45.4 (13.7)		
Friend or relative (n = 15)	78.4 (11.3)	21.6 (11.3)		
Other acquaintance (n = 28)	53.4 (13.6)	46.6 (13.6)		
Do not know or missing (n = 24)	60.2 (14.1)	39.8 (14.1)		
Perp age			(2, 160) = .96	.364
Likely or known juvenile (n = 38)	54.0 (11.6)	46.0 (11.6)		
Likely or known adult (n = 63)	59.4 (9.1)	40.6 (9.1)		
Do not know/missing (n = 4)	91.9 (9.4)	8.1 (9.4)		
Time since first incident			(2, 234) = 5.93	.002
0–3 years (n = 14)	26.7 (13.4)	73.3 (13.4)		
4–8 years (n = 42)	80.6 (6.7)	19.4 (6.7)		
9–12 years (n = 41)	69.7 (11.2)	30.3 (11.2)		
13–15 years (n = 8)	10.9 (9.0)	89.1 (9.0)		

Note. SE = standard error.

Both parents and victims reported a desire to meet with other survivors for mutual support. The present report finds that many features of episodes are not clearly associated with more persisting concerns, and this should caution clinicians and parents not to make assumptions about severity of episodes.

This study has a unique general population sample of image abuse survivors, but the findings are subject to important limitations. Because these episodes are retrospective and could have occurred more than a decade earlier, the experiences may not be reflective of current image abuse dynamics and impact. At this remove, they are also subject to possible recall bias. They are based on self-report and may not apply to the experiences of those with police-reported and confirmed cases or those in clinical treatment for sexual abuse trauma. The participation rate was low and may have excluded some survivors with higher levels of persisting concern. The measure of persisting concern is also not an instrument whose properties and characteristics have been previously explored or validated. No research has yet established that persisting concerns like these are related to trauma, but such concerns about visibility of images are widespread in survivor accounts about the harmful effects of episodes.

The expanding involvement of alienated and misused sexual images in the dynamics of child sexual abuse will increasingly be drawing the attention of survivor advocates, law enforcement, policymakers, treatment providers, and technology companies. Much more detailed understanding is needed about the dynamics of this abuse and its impact, as well as the specific needs of survivors. Research drawing on survivors to describe the variety and specifics of their experiences is a high priority for the field.

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