

Men's Experiences With Image-Based Sexual Abuse in the United States: Victimization Contexts, Emotional Experiences, and Perceived Vulnerabilities

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Abstract

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is a growing form of technology-facilitated sexual violence, with increasing prevalence across the globe and significant psychological and social consequences. This study explores the unique experiences of United States men victim-survivors of IBSA using a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine how they interpret the interpersonal contexts surrounding their victimization, the forms of abuse they experience, their emotional responses, and the factors they perceive as shaping their vulnerability. Findings highlight the role of intimate partner dynamics in facilitating abuse, with victimization commonly occurring following relational conflict. Participants also described blackmail and retaliatory dissemination as the primary forms of abuse and

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reported profound emotional consequences following their victimization. Socioeconomic circumstances and social identities also emerged as perceived vulnerability factors. This study underscores the importance of addressing the gendered nature of IBSA, where men (stereotypically framed as perpetrators) are increasingly recognized as victims of this form of abuse. The results call for a reexamination of societal norms around sexual violence and the legal system's response to IBSA, emphasizing the need for more inclusive support structures and policies that account for the unique experiences of male victims.

Keywords

gender-based violence, intimate partner violence/abuse, male victims of sexual assault, sexual assault adult victims, sexual assault victims/survivors

Introduction

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) encompasses multiple forms of abuse: the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (NDII), in which nude or sexual photos and videos are shared without consent; surreptitious capturing of intimate images such as “upskirting” or “downblousing” (McGlynn et al., 2017); and the recording and circulation of sexual assaults, often termed “recorded sexual assault” (Citron & Franks, 2014). IBSA also includes sextortion, where perpetrators use intimate images to blackmail victims for money, sexual favors, or other services (McGlynn et al., 2017), as well as sexualized deepfake abuse, in which artificial intelligence is used to generate non-consensual sexual content (Fido et al., 2022; Henry & Powell, 2015; McGlynn et al., 2017).

In the past decade, IBSA has been increasingly recognized as a pervasive global issue. In 2017, one in eight U.S. adults reported being victims of NDII or related threats (Eaton et al., 2017), while in 2019, one in five Australians reported experiencing at least one form of IBSA (Henry et al., 2019). More recent surveys suggest rates are rising: in 2022, 27% of U.S. respondents reported being threatened with the posting of sexual images without permission and 17% reported that such images had already been posted (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2022). Similarly, across the European Union, 30% of women expressed concern that their sexual images might be disseminated online without consent (HateAid, 2021).

Extensive research underscores the profound harms of IBSA for victims' psychological well-being, physical health, relationships, and overall quality of life (Paradiso et al., 2023). IBSA victimization has been associated with

anxiety (Champion et al., 2022), depression (Aborisade, 2021; Bates, 2017; Champion et al., 2022), and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bates, 2017), alongside increased physical ailments, economic instability, and social isolation (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; Spiker et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings reveal IBSA as not only a widespread violation of privacy but also a form of abuse that inflicts severe and lasting trauma, fundamentally disrupting the daily and long-term lives of victims.

IBSA as a Form of Gender-Based Violence

Not only is IBSA a widespread and serious issue, but it also represents a form of sexual and gender-based violence that can affect anyone. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a term that encompasses violence directed at an individual based on their gender. While it is often associated with violence against women (Thomas & Kopel, 2023), GBV also includes violence against men, non-binary individuals, and those of other gender identities (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Rooted in gender norms, power imbalances, and systemic inequalities, GBV is both enacted and interpreted through gendered, heterosexist, and sexist frameworks, shaping how such violence is experienced and understood (Thomas & Kopel, 2023). Research on gender identity threat underscores these dynamics: men whose masculinity is challenged tend to excuse male perpetrators and blame women victims, whereas women whose femininity is threatened tend to blame men perpetrators and support women victims (Munsch & Willer, 2012). Such patterns highlight how traditional gender roles shape attitudes toward sexual violence.

Traditional masculinity norms also predict acceptance of sexual violence myths. Tokar (2023) found that conformity to norms of power over women and heterosexual self-presentation significantly predicted rape myth acceptance among men, while other research shows that adhering to norms emphasizing dominance over women and harboring negative attitudes toward gay men is linked to increased acceptance of rape myths (Cole et al., 2020). These beliefs and behaviors perpetuate attitudes that justify and maintain power imbalances, facilitating the use of sexual violence as a means of asserting dominance and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Extensive research further documents the gendered dynamics of IBSA itself. Women in the United States typically report higher rates of NDII victimization, while men report higher rates of perpetration (Karasavva et al., 2023; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). Moreover, forms of gender- and sexuality-based victimization are closely associated with digital sexual harassment for both men and women, suggesting that such behaviors are not random but instead reflect and reproduce underlying stereotypes about femininity and masculinity (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2023). Men also endorse IBSA behaviors

and myths more than women; for example, compared to women participants, men participants in the United States, the United Kingdom, and AU attribute less responsibility to perpetrators of sexualized deepfake abuse and less harm to victims (Eaton et al., 2025). At the same time, gender shapes how NDII victims are judged; men victims who create their own intimate images tend to receive less blame than women (Zvi, 2022), but they are also seen as less harmed by IBSA than women victims (Eaton et al., 2025).

The Heteronormative IBSA Victim and Perpetrator

Despite its broad impact, IBSA research is overwhelmingly framed from a heteronormative perspective that views men as perpetrators and women as victims. For example, Henry and Powell's (2019) literature review of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) found that while men, women, and non-binary individuals can be both victims and perpetrators, women are disproportionately represented as victims across empirical studies. The near-exclusive use of this framing can hamper the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the unique circumstances and experiences that define men's IBSA victimization, creating significant gaps in addressing the varied and nuanced nature and impacts of this form of abuse. As awareness of men's victimization grows, along with evidence suggesting that men may be more vulnerable to certain forms of IBSA than women (Eaton et al., 2022), it is vital to explore these historically overlooked aspects of image-based sexual abuse.

Prevailing heteronormative framings and standards have led to a significant gap in understanding men's experiences of IBSA victimization. However, a growing body of research highlights the prevalence of men's IBSA victimization, with some studies finding men's rates of victimization to be similar to those of women (Champion et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2021). For instance, recent research examining the prevalence and nature of IBSA victimization among young adults in the United Kingdom found that men and women experienced and perpetrated IBSA at comparable rates (Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, Champion et al.'s study (2022) examining the impacts of TFSV as a form of gender-based harm found no difference in the number of TFSV forms experienced by men and women. Henry et al.'s work (2019) provides comparable findings, with results showing no significant gender differences in responses to feeling pressured to send a sexual selfie or receiving an unsolicited image of someone's genitals. Relatedly, Powell et al.'s (2019) research investigating the extent, nature, and predictors of IBSA perpetration found that among the 352 participants who had taken non-consensual nude or sexual images, similar rates of victimization were reported for both women (43.5%) and men (37.2%). Women

(35.5%) and men (36.7%) were also found to share non-consensual nude or sexual images at similar rates (Powell et al., 2019).

Because men are stereotypically considered to be the perpetrators rather than the victims of sexual violence, male victimization is a phenomenon often underestimated by national and international scientific communities (Margherita et al., 2021). This underestimation is influenced by multiple factors, including social norms that discourage men from reporting (Hlavka, 2017), research paradigms that prioritize female victimization (Stemple et al., 2017), and measurement limitations and exclusionary definitions (Stemple et al., 2017), all of which contribute to reduced disclosure and reporting among male victims. This assumption leads to omissions and biases in data collection and analysis, thus rendering our understanding of men's victimization experiences incomplete.

For instance, a recent study exploring men's experiences of male-on-male sexual victimization in the United Kingdom identified four key themes faced by survivors following their victimization: gendered narratives, coping with abuse, masculinity, and reporting to the police (Widanaralage et al., 2022). Survivors' stories illustrated how gendered narratives minimized their victimization experiences that deviated from stereotypical views of sexual violence, thereby making it harder for them to speak out (Widanaralage et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings highlight the need to move beyond prevalence estimates to better understand the contextual dimensions of men's experiences with IBSA.

Contextual Insights on Men's Experiences of IBSA. Recent multinational research indicates that men and women are often victimized by IBSA at comparable rates, even as differences may emerge in the nature and impact of these experiences (Umbach et al., 2025). However, research has primarily focused on women's experiences, with men's victimization remaining comparatively understudied. Nevertheless, existing evidence shows that for certain forms of technology-facilitated abuse, men can be more likely to be victims than women. For example, men report a greater likelihood of experiencing online abuse such as offensive name-calling and physical threats (Duggan, 2017). Some studies also suggest women perpetrate cyberstalking more often (Henry & Powell, 2018), and men report experiencing cyberstalking victimization more frequently than women (Bennett et al., 2011; Henry & Powell, 2018). In terms of IBSA specifically, a recent study assessing the frequency and effects of IBSA victimization and perpetration found that men were 27% more likely than women to report sending a sexual self-image when they did not really want to (Henry et al., 2019). Research by Eaton et al. (2022) also found that

among 2,006 U.S. adults, men were more likely than women to have experienced sextortion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Men from minoritized identity groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals and racial or ethnic minorities, are especially vulnerable to IBSA victimization. Eaton et al.'s (2022) study found that sextortion was more frequently experienced by Black and Native women, LGBTQ individuals, and emerging adults in comparison to other groups. Relatedly, gay men experience higher rates of IBSA victimization compared to heterosexual men (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020) and have also been shown to exhibit markedly higher rates of IBSA perpetration compared to heterosexual men (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; Umbach et al., 2025).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has also reported that financial sextortion more often targets men and boys (FBI, 2022), further underscoring the gendered dynamics of certain forms of TFSV. Qualitative research further suggests that men's responses to sextortion are shaped by broader social and relational norms. Men who experience sextortion often report feelings of shame and self-blame, particularly in the context of romantic relationships; some interpret sexting or webcam interactions as infidelity, which intensifies their sense of personal responsibility for the abuse (O'Malley, 2023). These findings highlight how societal expectations surrounding masculinity, relationships, and sexual behavior may shape male victims' interpretations of their experiences.

Research also demonstrates the complexity of men's understandings of consent and abuse in digital sexual interactions. Men send unsolicited intimate images (e.g., "dick pics") at higher rates than women (Spiker et al., 2025), and Weiss and Blume (2020) found that 41% of women and 22% of men reported receiving unsolicited sexual images, while 48% of men admitted to sending such images compared to only 15% of women. Men's greater likelihood of sending unsolicited sexual content may place them at heightened risk of later victimization by the same content. Further complicating this picture, Dietzel's (2022) study of men who have sex with men found that while many participants viewed receiving unsolicited "dick pics" as non-consensual and harmful, others were undecided about whether sending and receiving them qualified as abuse. Dietzel (2022) also emphasize the need to consider contextual factors such as sexual orientation, relationship dynamics, and access to power when analyzing and interpreting findings.

The Present Research

The purpose of the present phenomenological study was to explore diverse U.S. men's experiences and understandings of their own IBSA victimization.

While we attended to the circumstances under which men reported becoming victims, as well as the identity-based and situational factors they perceived as shaping their vulnerability, these elements were examined as part of participants' broader meaning-making processes rather than as objective predictors of risk. Rather than focusing on the frequency of codes or themes, our analytic emphasis instead prioritized understanding the subjective meanings embedded in participants' accounts in order to better grasp the essence of the phenomenon under study. In line with phenomenological methodology, we thus sought to identify common meaning structures across individuals and distill these into a description of the phenomenon's overall "essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2024; van Manen, 1990). Accordingly, our analysis centered on how men interpreted their victimization, including how they made sense of the circumstances, vulnerabilities, and perceived causes surrounding their experiences.

Methodological Justification

An in-depth understanding of U.S. men's experiences of IBSA and the circumstances contributing to their victimization has yet to be established. To address this gap, the present study employed a transcendental phenomenological methodology focused on men's lived experiences of IBSA victimization. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach aimed at uncovering how individuals perceive and interpret a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This design is particularly well suited for exploring men's shared experiences of victimization, allowing for an in-depth examination of factors specific to male survivors that may be absent or different in other populations (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Although challenges include recruiting men willing to disclose such experiences and addressing the potential influence of researchers' prior knowledge, this approach enables a rich, contextualized understanding of IBSA as men themselves experience it.

Selecting a phenomenological framework also allows for the exploration of the gendered norms, biases, and expectations that shape sexual violence, a context often marked by misconceptions that men cannot be victims or that their experiences are less serious than those of non-male victims (Thomas & Kopel, 2023). This methodology captures these broader social dynamics without delegitimizing or misconstruing male victims' realities. Moreover, it accommodates the intersecting aspects of social identity that collectively influence how men experience and interpret IBSA. In doing so, a phenomenological approach facilitates an analysis sensitive to the complexity of these factors, producing insights that might otherwise be overlooked in more structured or quantitative designs.

Methods

Procedure

The present study is a secondary analysis of qualitative interview data originally collected as part of a larger mixed-methods study examining TFSV during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eaton et al., 2022). In the parent study, over 2,000 U.S. adults were recruited through Qualtrics panels using proportional quota sampling to obtain a demographically diverse sample. Participants completed a survey assessing multiple forms of TFSV, including image-based sexual abuse (IBSA). Individuals who reported experiencing IBSA during the COVID-19 pandemic were invited to provide their email address if they were interested in participating in a follow-up qualitative interview.

These follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted as part of two qualitative studies examining survivors' coping strategies (Siegel et al., 2024) and proposed solutions for addressing IBSA (Eaton et al., 2024). To broaden participation, additional interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, targeted social media outreach, and the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative listserv. Eligible participants were contacted by email and paired with a trained interviewer to schedule an interview at their preferred time.

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit participants' lived experiences of IBSA, including the circumstances surrounding their victimization, emotional responses, coping strategies, and recommendations for improving institutional and policy responses. Example questions included, "*You shared in the earlier survey that you were a victim of cyber sexual abuse during the pandemic. Can you tell me about your experience?*," and "*Can you tell me more about your emotions when you first learned that you were a victim of this cyber sexual abuse? Have those feelings changed as time has passed?*" The present study draws on this qualitative dataset, focusing specifically on men's accounts of IBSA victimization.

All seven interviewers were women trained in trauma-informed and qualitative interviewing; only one participated in the present analysis. Training comprised a 90-min session led by a PhD-level interviewer with over a decade of experience working with sex-trafficking victims, followed by a 2-hr role-play session with the principal investigator (PI) using the study's materials. Interviews were conducted and audio-recorded via Zoom, with participants choosing whether to keep their cameras on and selecting pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

In line with trauma-informed best practices (Isobel, 2021), participants were screened for suicidality before consent ("*Are you having any thoughts of harming yourself?*"). One participant who expressed self-harm ideation was immediately given state-specific support resources and offered a

next-day follow-up call from the senior author; the interview was terminated. The remaining 19 participants proceeded to consent and interview. All were debriefed afterward, provided with hotline and online support contacts, and compensated with a \$30 Amazon gift card. Transcripts were generated via the PI's private Otter.ai account, reviewed for accuracy, and anonymized. Interviews ranged from 13 min to 1 hr 35 min, with most lasting 30 to 45 min.

Participants

The present sample was drawn from a larger qualitative dataset of 42 participants originally collected to examine coping strategies and proposed solutions for addressing IBSA in the United States (Eaton et al., 2024; Siegel et al., 2024). Identified themes related to men's victimization prompted this separate analysis focusing on male experiences. Of the 19 men in the original dataset, 13 provided sufficient contextual detail for an in-depth examination of circumstances surrounding IBSA victimization; the other six were excluded due to insufficient data relevant to the present analysis. All 13 participants had their images disseminated. As determined by a pre-screener, participants were U.S. residents aged 18 or older who experienced IBSA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ages ranged from 22 to 47 (median = 25). Seven identified as Black/Caribbean Black/African, five as White, and one declined to disclose race. Most identified as heterosexual ($n=10$); one identified as bisexual, one as gay, and one declined to disclose sexual identity.

Analytic Approach

We conducted a codebook thematic analysis to support our phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This analysis was selected to balance both deductive and inductive approaches. Initial codes were informed by existing literature on IBSA and male victimization, allowing for structured comparison across participants, while still permitting the identification of new, emergent themes during coding. This approach was particularly appropriate given our phenomenological focus and the involvement of multiple coders, as it allowed for enhanced consistency, transparency, and reliability in the analytic process. All 13 transcripts were reviewed to identify emerging patterns organized into parent codes and child codes, which were defined and documented in a codebook¹. A subset of five transcripts was coded first to assess consistency and refine definitions. The finalized codebook was then applied to all transcripts in MAXQDA 2020 (Verbi Software, 2024).

Our focus was on the salience of themes across participants, not the frequency within individual transcripts; codes were applied by dialogue section

rather than sentence-by-sentence, and only one instance of each subtheme per section was coded. We coded only explicit participant statements rather than assumptions, and some participants had multiple child codes under a parent code while others had none. After coding, MAXQDA's analysis features were used to compare patterns and evaluate intercoder agreement. An 80% agreement threshold was required before further analysis (Saldaña, 2021); discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively until the threshold was met, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.²

Positionality and Reflexivity

A researcher's positionality shapes every stage of the research process, from how phenomena are observed to how data is collected and analyzed (D'silva et al., 2016). As such, we remained cognizant of our positionality throughout the entirety of the research process. Our data analysis team consisted of one white cisgender woman, one white cisgender man, and a Latino cisgender man, all varying in age, national origin, and experiences of sexual violence. Our diverse experiences and expertise contribute a range of skills and perspectives, resulting in an analysis that integrates and reflects our collective viewpoints. While the diversity within our research team has greatly enriched this work, we recognize that additional varied perspectives could further enhance the depth and complexity of our analysis. We encourage the inclusion of more diverse voices in future research to expand understanding in this area.

Results

Analysis yielded several interrelated themes that were organized into three higher-order tiers: the interpersonal and situational contexts of victimization, the nature and emotional impact of victimization, and perceived vulnerability factors contributing to victimization. Below, we provide a more comprehensive examination of our analysis results.

Interpersonal and Situational Contexts of Men's Victimization Experiences

To understand the circumstances under which participants experienced victimization, analyses focused on the events, interpersonal contexts, and relational dynamics surrounding their experiences of IBSA. In addressing this aim, two interconnected themes were examined: *victim-perpetrator relationship type* (Table 1) and *circumstances surrounding victimization* (Figure 1).

Table 1. Participant Representation Across Victim–Perpetrator Relationship Types.

Parent Code	Participant Representation
Current/Past Partner	• • • • • • • •
No Relationship	• •
Extraneous Relationship	• •
Acquaintance	•

Note. Each dot represents one participant whose account reflected the corresponding relationship type. Dots indicate participant representation and do not reflect the frequency with which a relationship type was discussed.

Victim–Perpetrator Relationship. As shown in Table 1, most participants described the perpetrator as a *current or former romantic partner*. Participants explained that intimate images or videos had originally been created or exchanged consensually within the context of an established romantic or sexual relationship with someone they trusted. These relationships included current girlfriends or boyfriends, ex-partners, and ongoing romantic “situationships.” Other participants described their victimization occurring within the context of an *affair or infidelity–related relationship*. In such cases, participants explained that the perpetrator was someone with whom they engaged in a secret sexual or romantic relationship while separated from, or committed to, another partner. For example, F described developing a sexual relationship with a woman while separated from his wife during the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining “we were just supposed to be normal casual friends.” Several other participants described perpetrators as individuals with whom they had *no prior relationship or familiarity*. In these cases, perpetrators were described as strangers or anonymous online actors. One participant explained they were victimized by an *acquaintance*, that is, someone they knew through a casual, non-committal relationship.

Circumstances Surrounding Victimization. Participants commonly described a *relational conflict* occurring prior to their victimization. Within this context, participants explained that victimization occurred following a *falling out* with a romantic partner (Figure 1). Across accounts, victimization was often situated within the deterioration, disruption, or breakdown of intimate relationships. Participants further detailed that conflicts arose from breakups, unresolved disagreements, rejection, or other forms of relational strain. For example, Bob described his victimization occurring after ending his relationship and beginning a new one, explaining, “I decided to end things, and I started dating her friend. Her best friend. And she [the perpetrator] wasn’t

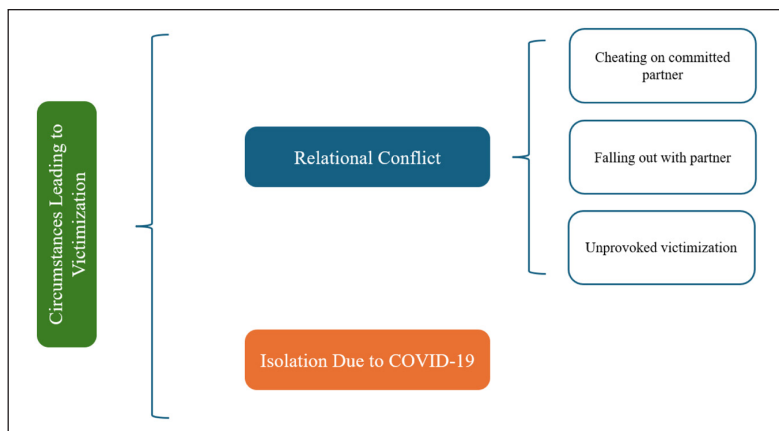


Figure 1. Thematic organization of circumstances surrounding victimization.

good with it.” Similarly, Banks attributed his victimization to conflict that emerged after he refused his boyfriend’s demands, stating, “What led him to post those pictures? I think it’s about me refusing to move in with him.” Others, including Shadow, Martin, and Willy, likewise described their victimization as occurring following the dissolution of romantic relationships characterized by separation, unresolved conflict, or infidelity allegations.

For some, victimization occurred within the context of *cheating on a committed partner*. These accounts involved participants engaging in a secret sexual or romantic relationship outside of an existing committed partnership. In some cases, victimization occurred after a partner discovered the affair, whereas in others it happened after they attempted to end the extradyadic relationship. As Vic explained, he became involved with his long-term partner’s friend and later found himself “stuck in the middle” after attempting to end the affair. Additionally, a small number of participants described their victimization as unprovoked. John and John Clark both reported being targeted by unknown individuals and were unable to identify a specific interpersonal conflict that precipitated their victimization. While John was uncertain whether the perpetrator was a stranger or someone he knew, John Clark described being targeted by an unknown individual he had encountered through Reddit.

Other participants identified *social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic* as a relevant circumstance surrounding their experiences. Across accounts, participants described the pandemic as increasing time spent alone, limiting social interaction, and disrupting their usual sources of connection and support. Some attributed isolation as a contributing to relationship strain,

increased online engagement, or pursuing companionship through new romantic or sexual relationships that they believed were unlikely to have developed under normal circumstances. As Walter explained, “COVID-19 contributed because it made me idle.” Similarly, Vic and F described seeking companionship during periods of loneliness, whereas V attributed pandemic-related restrictions to increased relationship strain. John Clark also described spending substantially more time online due to reduced opportunities for in-person socialization, while Kennedy identified the broader economic consequences of the pandemic as contributing to the circumstances surrounding his victimization.

Nature and Emotional Impact of Men's Victimization Experiences

To understand what participants' experiences of IBSA were like, analyses focused on both the forms of abuse they encountered and the emotional responses following their victimization. In addressing this question, two interconnected themes were identified: *type of abuse* (Figure 2) and *emotional experience* (Figure 3).

Type of Abuse. As shown in Figure 2, participants described their victimization experiences as taking one of two forms: *blackmail* or *retaliation for a perceived slight*. *Blackmail* referred to situations in which perpetrators threatened to distribute participants' intimate images unless specific demands were met. Three distinct forms of blackmail were further identified: *demands for money*, *demands to continue/resume an intimate relationship*, and *demands for other concessions*. In cases involving financial blackmail, perpetrators used the threat of image dissemination to pressure participants into providing money or financial assistance.³ Across accounts, perpetrators threatened to distribute participants' intimate images unless financial demands were met. As V explained, “I was being blackmailed. . . she would ask me for a certain sum, and if I did not. . . give into such sums, the threat would come about, you know, she sending my nudes.” Across these accounts, intimate images became a means through which perpetrators attempted to extract money by exploiting participants' fears of the personal and social consequences of exposure.

A second form of blackmail involved demands to continue or resume an intimate relationship. In these cases, participants described perpetrators using their images as a means of preventing them from ending a romantic or sexual relationship. When participants attempted to disengage, threats of dissemination were used to maintain ongoing access to and control over them. F, for

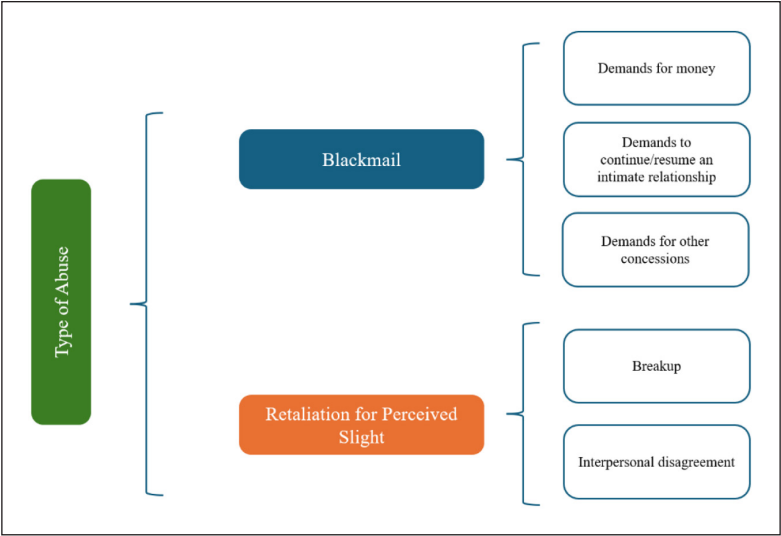


Figure 2. Thematic organization of types of abuse.

example, described receiving threats after attempting to end a relationship, explaining that once he “wanted quits,” the perpetrator threatened to send intimate photos and videos to his wife. Other participants similarly reported being threatened with disclosure to spouses, employers, family members, and professional networks unless they maintained the relationship or fulfilled the perpetrator’s sexual demands. As Anonymous explained, a former client threatened to release his intimate images to family members, employers, and colleagues “if I didn’t agree to continue seeing him in a sexual nature.” Additionally, participants described perpetrators using intimate images to secure other forms of compliance, such as influencing interpersonal conflicts or threatening reputational harm. In Willy’s case, intimate photos were used as leverage in a dispute involving his ex-girlfriend and one of her friends, whereas John believed threats to release his images were intended to publicly damage his reputation.

Retaliation for a perceived slight involved the distribution of intimate images after perpetrators perceived themselves as having been wronged by the victim. Participants described two primary forms of such retaliation: dissemination following a *breakup* and dissemination following an *interpersonal disagreement*. In cases involving relationship dissolution, participants described their intimate photos being released after the end of a romantic relationship, often in response to the perpetrator’s perceived feelings of

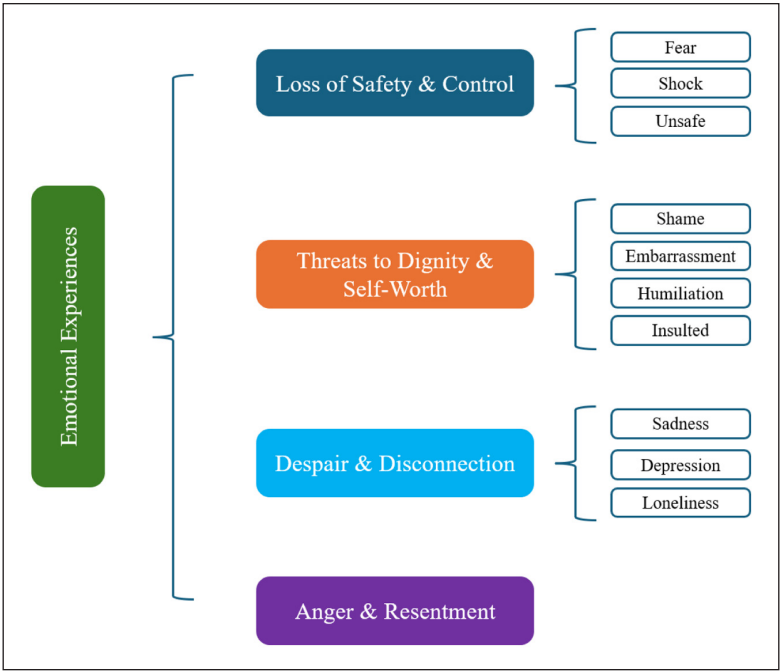


Figure 3. Thematic organization of emotional experiences.

rejection or betrayal. As Shadow explained, “we broke up. So, I think he was intimidated by that.” In other cases, images were released following interpersonal disagreements. Martin, for example, believed his ex-girlfriend disseminated his images because “we had disagreed, and I think she just did that punishment.” Likewise, Banks interpreted the release of his images as retaliation for refusing his former partner's demand to move in together, recalling that he was warned the images would be posted if he continued “avoiding him.” Across these accounts, participants viewed the dissemination of their intimate images as an act of retaliation, intended to punish them for actions the perpetrator perceived as offensive.

Emotional Experiences. Participants described their victimization as eliciting four primary emotional responses: *loss of safety and control*, *threats to dignity and self-worth*, *despair and disconnection*, and *anger and resentment* (Figure 3). Characterized by fear, shock, and feeling unsafe following victimization, *loss of safety and control* reflected participants' diminished sense of autonomy and increased feelings of uncertainty. Across accounts,

participants described living in fear of the social, professional, and relational consequences of their victimization. As Bob explained, "I was scared. I even thought I could be expelled from school and. . .being a player in the school you were supposed to be a role model. . . I even thought I could lose my scholarship." Others recalled profound shock at the realization that someone had intentionally violated their trust or sought to inflict harm. As Anonymous shared, "I was so shocked and surprised that someone would do this. . . I couldn't fathom why someone would go to these lengths just out of spite." Across accounts, participants described their victimization as fundamentally undermining their sense of safety, leaving them fearful of future harm and uncertain about whom they could trust.

Participants who described experiencing threats to *dignity and self-worth* reported feelings of shame, embarrassment, humiliation, and insult following their victimization. Feelings of judgment, exposure, and personal disgrace were common across accounts and were often accompanied by diminished self-esteem and confidence. According to Vic, "when it happened, I lost my self-esteem." Participants also described avoiding engagement with others anticipating further ridicule, blame, or humiliation. As Banks recalled, "I just felt like, I am shy, embarrassed, like, I don't want to share with anybody else." Relatedly, participants with experiences of *despair and disconnection* reported feeling sad, depressed, and lonely. Many became emotionally overwhelmed and felt isolated, while others described severe psychological distress. As John Clark recalled, "Well, it actually made me depressed for a while. I actually even thought of committing suicide, but I got over it." Collectively, participants viewed their victimization as eroding their sense of self-worth and emotional well-being.

Finally, participants who experienced *anger and resentment* reported feelings of frustration, indignation, and anger directed either toward themselves or the perpetrator. Participants whose anger was directed toward the perpetrator described intense feelings of betrayal and outrage. As Martin explained, "I was very angry. . . this one took it to another level because she betrayed me," while Walter stated, "it really pissed off." Others expressed self-directed anger, blaming themselves for failing to recognize what they perceived as warning signs that they believed could have prevented the abuse. As Vic reflected, "I was so angry at myself. . . I felt so stupid. . . I was so angry at myself for not being able to see entrapment."

Perceived Vulnerability Factors Contributing to Victimization

To understand what participants believed made them vulnerable to IBSA victimization, analyses focused on the social, economic, and identity-based

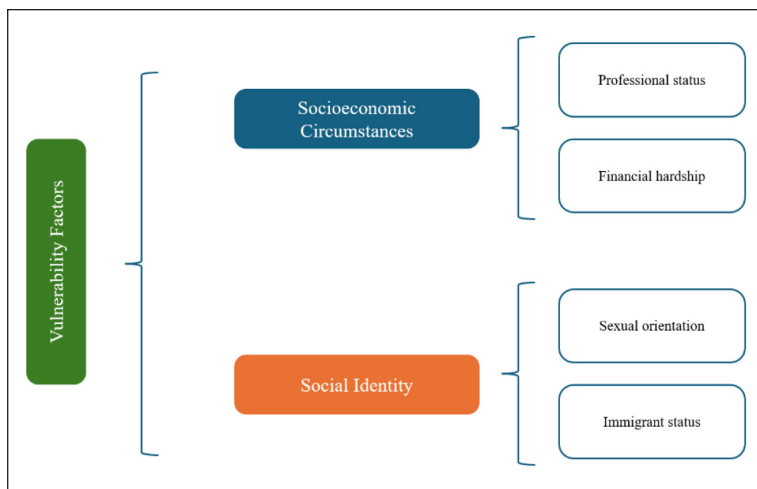


Figure 4. Perceived vulnerability factors contributing to men's victimization experiences.

factors they perceived as increasing their susceptibility to victimization or intensifying its consequences. The identified vulnerability factors fell into two broad categories: *socioeconomic circumstances* and *social identities* (Figure 4).

Socioeconomic Circumstances. As Figure 4 demonstrates, *socioeconomic circumstances* was the most cited vulnerability factor circumstance. Within this category, participants described their *professional status* as increasing their vulnerability to victimization in one of two ways: either by making them attractive targets for perpetrators or by heightening the potential consequences of image dissemination. For example, John believed his public profile made him a desirable victim, explaining, “I was like a good target. . . it will go viral and they need to grant the person the fame he wants,” suggesting that attempts to discredit him could attract widespread attention while benefiting the perpetrator. Others emphasized the professional repercussions of exposure. V, for instance, feared that intimate material could easily reach colleagues through the perpetrator's social connections, expressing, “my job could actually be on the line if such a video you know, goes online.” Participants also described *financial hardship* as amplifying the consequences of victimization. Concerns about reduced income, financial insecurity, and existing economic obligations made the demands and repercussions associated with victimization more difficult to manage. Reflecting on being

blackmailed for money during the COVID-19 pandemic, F explained that “salaries were being cut short” and his paycheck “wasn’t enough,” making the financial burden of the abuse especially difficult to bear.

Social Identity. Participants also identified aspects of their social identities as increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Kennedy described his *sexual orientation* as a catalyst to his victimization experience, explaining that intimate images shared with a same-sex partner were later used to coerce him for money. Reflecting on the experience, he stated, “I’m gay. So, this guy wanted to share my pictures online,” suggesting that the perpetrator exploited his sexuality as a means of harassment and coercion. Similarly, Anonymous described his *immigration status* as a source of vulnerability. In addition to threatening to disclose intimate images and personal information, the perpetrator also contacted authorities and accused Anonymous of violating immigration laws. As Anonymous explained, the perpetrator contacted officials because he was “under the impression that I broke immigration laws,” illustrating how his immigration status was weaponized as a means of intimidation and control.⁴

Taken together, our findings demonstrate that participants understood their victimization as a complex experience collectively shaped by interpersonal relationships, situational contexts, emotional consequences, and broader social and structural vulnerabilities. Across accounts, participants emphasized that the circumstances preceding their victimization, the forms of abuse assumed, its emotional impact, and their perceived sources of vulnerability were deeply intertwined, reflecting the intricacy of men’s lived experiences of IBSA.

Discussion

Consistent with existing research, most IBSA victims in our sample were targeted by a current or former partner. This finding highlights the intimate and personal nature of IBSA, where the abuse often occurs within established relationships—whether romantic, sexual, or otherwise—and is consistent with broader sexual violence research showing that perpetrators are often individuals known to the victim (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). In fact, it was rare for participants to be targeted by individuals to whom they had no prior relation, further emphasizing how this form of abuse tends to unfold within relationships characterized by trust and intimacy. Additionally, participants generally viewed their victimization as a profound betrayal, transforming relationships that were once deemed safe and intimate spaces into sources of emotional harm and psychological distress. These findings elucidate the

fundamentally relational nature of IBSA and are consistent with existing research demonstrating the critical role interpersonal dynamics play in driving this behavior (Eaton et al., 2020; Walsh & Tener, 2022).

Participants also frequently interpreted the dissemination of their intimate images as an act of retaliation following relationship dissolution or interpersonal conflict. Across accounts, participants understood the abuse as a form of punishment for actions they believed the perpetrator perceived as rejection, betrayal, or defiance. In this sense, the meaning of victimization extended beyond the unauthorized sharing of intimate images; participants experienced the abuse as a deliberate attempt to inflict emotional, social, and reputational harm in response to perceived interpersonal wrongdoing. These interpretations align with prior research suggesting that IBSA can function as a mechanism of coercive control within intimate relationships, with the deliberate intent to harm victims (Eaton et al., 2020; Scott-Storey et al., 2023; Walsh & Tener, 2022). Notably, many participants identified women as the perpetrators of this retaliatory abuse, challenging heteronormative assumptions that position men primarily as perpetrators and women as victims of sexual violence. These findings suggest that women may also use intimate images as a means of punishment or coercive control within intimate relationships, warranting further research on gendered patterns of retaliatory IBSA.

Participants' relational experiences were accompanied by profound emotional consequences, disrupting their sense of safety, dignity, and control and often leaving them to grapple with fear, shame, isolation, and anger simultaneously. Collectively, these emotional responses suggest that the harms of IBSA extended beyond the dissemination of intimate images, fundamentally altering how participants understood their relationships, social standing, and sense of self. Together, these findings underscore that men's experiences of IBSA involve not only emotional distress, but also broader disruptions to identity, interpersonal trust, and psychological security. Future research should further investigate how IBSA victimization disrupts these and related aspects of men's lived experiences.

Although the sample size in this study was too small to draw definitive conclusions about the experiences of men from minoritized identity groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals and racial minorities, the findings nonetheless suggest that participants understood vulnerability through particular social positions. Consistent with existing research demonstrating heightened vulnerability to IBSA among marginalized populations (Eaton et al., 2022; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020), participants identified sexual orientation and immigration status as factors they believed increased their vulnerability or intensified the consequences of victimization. Notably, despite most participants identifying as men of color, race was not explicitly discussed

as shaping vulnerability, nor did participants identify their gender itself as contributing to their victimization. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of understanding IBSA through an intersectional lens that considers how multiple social identities and structural positions collectively shape vulnerability and the lived experience of victimization.

Finally, participants commonly viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as shaping the circumstances surrounding their victimization. Rather than directly causing IBSA, participants described the pandemic as fostering conditions that heightened perceived vulnerability, including increased social isolation, greater reliance on digital communication, and the pursuit of new online and romantic relationships (Eaton et al., 2022; Shoib et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings indicate that participants understood the COVID-19 pandemic as an important backdrop to their victimization, underscoring the need to examine how men's experiences of IBSA may differ outside the unique social conditions of the pandemic.

Practical Implications and Justice Efforts

Findings from this study highlight the urgent need to recognize and address men's experiences of IBSA victimization. Gender norms that discourage disclosure leave many male survivors feeling marginalized and silenced (Thomas & Kopel, 2023). Normalizing the recognition of abuse among men requires challenging harmful stereotypes of masculinity while creating safe, confidential avenues—such as counseling, support networks, and reporting systems—that empower survivors to seek help without fear of stigma. At the same time, legal reforms are critical for reducing IBSA and protecting victims. Research shows that victim-survivors are eager for legal solutions that provide protection and hold perpetrators accountable (Eaton et al., 2024). Laws should be informed by victims' lived experiences and adapted to the distinct nature of online abuse to ensure equal access to justice for men, women, and gender-diverse individuals. Policies that both hold perpetrators accountable and safeguard victims from further harm can help build a more inclusive and effective justice system that responds to the complexities of IBSA.

Limitations

This study offers valuable insights into men's experiences of IBSA, but several limitations warrant consideration. Although data saturation can occur with as few as nine interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), our small sample ($n=13$) limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population of male IBSA victims. Despite demographic diversity in age, race, and sexual

orientation, the study may not fully capture the experiences of all men. Additionally, the sample consisted of men who acknowledged and identified their experiences as victimization, which potentially excludes individuals who have experienced IBSA but do not label or recognize these experiences as harmful. This limitation is particularly relevant given prior research suggesting that social norms, understandings of consent, and stigma may influence whether individuals—especially sexual minority men—interpret and disclose such experiences as abuse (Waldman, 2019; Zvi et al., 2026). In addition, our phenomenological approach—well suited for exploring lived experiences—relies on subjective accounts and does not permit broad quantitative comparisons across victim groups or settings. Finally, the results reflect participants' perceptions, particularly regarding perpetrators' motivations such as retaliation, which may not represent objective or causal truths. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as subjective understandings of events within the context of this qualitative study rather than definitive causal explanations.

Future Directions

Given the scarcity of research on men's experiences of IBSA, further investigation is needed to understand how men perceive and experience this form of sexual abuse. Most studies focus on female victims, leaving gaps in knowledge about the unique challenges men face and the ways gender norms, societal expectations, and stigma shape their responses (Thomas & Kopel, 2023). Expanding research on male victims can help dismantle these barriers and improve support services tailored to their needs. Future work should also examine IBSA within diverse sociocultural contexts and gendered spaces where power dynamics and institutional norms may contribute to unique forms of abuse, offering a more nuanced understanding of men's victimization. In addition to documenting outcomes, research should adopt a preventative lens, identifying early warning signs, relational and societal risk factors, and designing educational programs for both potential perpetrators and victims. Raising awareness of IBSA, its impacts, and available legal protections, especially among young men and at-risk groups, can play a critical role in reducing its occurrence.

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Ethical Considerations

The research was approved by the IRB at Florida International University (FIU IRB Protocol #: IRB-21-0040-AM01, Approval Date: July 12, 2021) and is in full

compliance with the American Psychological Association's regulations for ethical treatment of participants and standards for reporting and publishing scientific information.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Consent was obtained both in writing and verbally prior to the start of each interview, in accordance with IRB-approved procedures.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive and potentially identifiable nature of the qualitative interview data, transcripts are not publicly available. Access to de-identified data may be granted on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the principal investigator and with appropriate institutional approval.

Notes

1. Appendix A (Tables A1–A4) provides the complete analytic codebook, including themes and subthemes, operational definitions, and representative participant quotations used to support the analysis.
2. This study ensured rigor and trustworthiness by following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, employing peer debriefing, expert checks, memoing, reflexivity, purposive sampling, and multiple forms of triangulation (methodological, theoretical, investigator, and data) to document processes, validate coding, and ground findings in participants' perspectives.
3. Financially motivated blackmail is commonly referred to as sextortion (O'Malley, 2023). Because the present study is a subsample drawn from a larger study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eaton et al., 2022), the prominence of sextortion among participants may reflect the unique social and economic conditions of that period. Consistent with this interpretation, findings from the larger study (Eaton et al., 2022) identified sextortion as a common form of victimization reported by men during the pandemic.

4. Notably, participants did not identify their gender as contributing to their vulnerability to IBSA victimization, despite the study's focus on men's experiences. Likewise, although most participants identified as men of color, race was not explicitly discussed as a factor shaping vulnerability or the consequences of victimization within participants' accounts.

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Kevin Ortiz Diaz, M.S., is an Applied Social and Cultural Psychology Ph.D. candidate at Florida International University. His research examines cultural and societal factors that influence reporting and help-seeking among military members and veterans who have experienced sexual trauma and violence. A cisgender, Latino, heterosexual man born and raised in Puerto Rico and a former member of the United States military, Ortiz Diaz approaches the present work with an awareness of how his positionality, lived experiences, and varying access to privilege and marginalization shape his understanding of survivors' experiences of sexual violence.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Results for Circumstances Surrounding Abuse.

Code	Definition	Representative Quote
Relational Conflict	Descriptions pertaining to the disagreements, clashes in values, or opposing needs	
<i>Falling Out with Partner</i>	Victim had an argument with partner, ended the relationship, or refused to get back together	I felt a feeling of betrayal. . .she leaked them.
<i>Cheating on Committed Partner</i>	Victim was cheating on partner with another person (the perpetrator)	She thought that was the best revenge she could do to me.
<i>Unprovoked Victimization</i>	No prior relationship between victim & perpetrator; random victimization	This guy edits people's pictures and tries to blackmail you.
COVID-19 Isolation	Victims weren't able to see others and sought social interaction/connection; tried to fill social gaps through alternative avenues	COVID-19 contributed because it made me idle.

Note. Parent codes appear in bold; child codes are italicized to indicate subcategories. "COVID-19 Isolation" is a standalone parent code.

Table A2. Results for Types of Abuse Experienced.

Code	Definition	Representative Quote
Retaliatory Control	Images were released without notice to victim and with the intention to retaliate against the victim for a perceived slight	
<i>Breakup</i>	Victim and perpetrator discontinued relationship; images released as retaliation	We broke up. So, I think he was intimidated by that.
<i>Disagreement</i>	Victim had disagreement/fight with perpetrator; images released	She's someone who gets overwhelmed by anger.
Blackmail	Threat of leaking victim's images if perpetrator's demands are not met	
<i>Blackmail for Money</i>	Perpetrator demands money from victim in exchange for not releasing images	He needed some cash.
<i>Blackmail for Continuing Relationship</i>	Perpetrator demands continuation of intimate relationship with victim	If I refused to do what she asked of me, she would forward these to my girlfriend.
<i>Blackmail for Other Reasons</i>	Perpetrator makes demands of victim that are not monetary or relationship in nature	This guy wanted to share my pictures online to pass as his own.

Note. Parent codes appear in bold; child codes are italicized to indicate subcategories.

Table A3. Results for Emotional Experiences.

Code	Definition	Representative Quote
Loss of Safety & Control	References to emotional reactions wherein participants felt unable to protect themselves, control the situation, or maintain a sense of personal security	
<i>Fear</i>	Fear, anxiety, or apprehension regarding actual or anticipated harm, consequences, or future victimization	I was scared.
<i>Shock</i>	Disbelief, astonishment, or emotional numbness	Well, at first I was shocked. . .
<i>Unsafe</i>	Feeling physically, emotionally, or psychologically unsafe, vulnerable, or under threat	I felt threatened. I felt insulted. Yeah, so many thoughts in one other time. I felt insecure, most especially.
Threats to Dignity & Self-Worth	Emotional responses wherein participants felt their sense of dignity, respect, social standing, or personal worth was undermined	
<i>Shame</i>	Feelings of worthlessness, defectiveness, or diminished self-worth	My self esteem was really low. I was ashamed. Yes.
<i>Embarrassment</i>	Feelings of self-consciousness, awkwardness, or discomfort	I just felt like, I am shy, embarrassed, like, I don't want to share with anybody else.
<i>Humiliation</i>	Feeling degraded, demeaned, or stripped of dignity	I kept on thinking about what my colleagues are gonna say. I was holding like I think a sensitive position and imagine I would be ridiculed, I would be made a mockery about, I think that's that. . .
<i>Insulted</i>	Feeling personally offended, disrespected, or affronted	I felt insulted. Yeah, so so many thoughts in one other time.
Despair & Disconnection	Emotional responses characterized by sadness, depressive feelings, loneliness, and related feelings of disconnection.	
<i>Sadness</i>	Feelings of sorrow, unhappiness, or emotional pain	I felt really bad. I felt like I'm worthless. Felt like I was given an opportunity to go and study and I'm wasting it.
<i>Depression</i>	Persistent or pervasive feelings of hopelessness, emptiness, despair, or emotional numbness	So, you know, being harassed sexually is not an easy task for someone to come in touch with me. So I talked some friends because I was so much depressed over the pictures. Me seeing myself over the internet.
<i>Loneliness</i>	Feelings of being alone, disconnected from others, or emotionally isolated	So it was not at a stage that I was understanding we had, and also when my friends were not there, let's say mostly at night, I was feeling so lonely. . .
Anger & Resentment	Emotional responses characterized by anger, resentment, frustration, or indignation in reaction to the victimization experience and its consequences.	I was very angry. I was mad at her because already in an argument and I was already mad at her but this one took it to another level.

Note. Parent codes appear in bold; child codes are italicized to indicate subcategories. "Anger & Resentment" is a standalone parent code.

Table A4. Codes, Definitions, and Sample Quotes for Vulnerability Factors.

Code	Definition	Representative Quote
Vulnerability Factors	The social, economic, and identity-based characteristics that participants believed increased their susceptibility to or intensified the consequences of victimization	
<i>Financial Hardship</i>	Fear of or actual income loss or financial hardship; lack of financial means	It cost me my job from the company.
<i>Immigrant Status</i>	Victim's immigration status made them more vulnerable to victimization or exploitation	My harasser had tried to contact Canadian border authorities through an anonymous email.
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	Victim's sexual orientation or sexuality made them more vulnerable to victimization or exploitation	Yeah, I had a guy. So literally, I'm gay. So, this guy wanted to share my pictures online.
<i>Career/Professional Status</i>	Victim's career or professional status made them more vulnerable to victimization or exploitation	One of my former clients threatened to release screenshots of my online profiles.

Note. Parent codes appear in bold; child codes are italicized to indicate subcategories.