Tackling Gender-Based Violence to Increase College Students' Well-Being: A Study on Psychosocial Dimensions Affecting Attitudes Toward the Nonconsensual Intimate Image Dissemination

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Abstract

One of the most recent forms of gender-based violence is non-consensual intimate images dissemination (NCII). This type of offense, popularly referred to as "revenge pornography", consists of the nonconsensual creation, dissemination, or threat of dissemination of nude or sexually explicit images (photographs and videos) of individuals. NCII is considered a public health issue because of its damaging psychological consequences, especially among adolescents and young adults. According to the social-ecological perspective, psychosocial variables (e.g., endorsement of sexist attitudes, rape myths, sexual double standards, and stereotypes on masculinity) influence and bias perceptions of NCII, but research on these dimensions is still lacking. The present study aims to investigate such variables in a sample of Italian college students (N = 309, 65.4% female, mean age = 21.95, SD = 2.00). The results will be discussed in the light of interventions aimed at raising awareness of violence and its prevention, thus increasing youth well-being in their educational and everyday contexts.

Keywords: College students, Gender-based violence, Non-consensual intimate images dissemination, Psychological well-being.

1. Introduction

The non-consensual dissemination of intimate material (NCII) can be described as a form of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and consists of the non-consensual creation, sharing, or threat to disseminate nude and/or sexually explicit images or videos on the internet [1]. Given that the relevance of NCII as a form of gender-based violence is still overlooked and that victims are often reluctant to report the event due to the social stigma surrounding the phenomenon [2], its prevalence is difficult to estimate. However, past research has shown that perpetration rates range

from 6.7% [3] to 16.4% [4], while victimization rates may vary from 3.3% [5] to 28.5% [6]. Both perpetration and victimization rates are particularly high among young adults, especially college students [4]. Moreover, although NCII may involve individuals identifying in any gender, the phenomenon disproportionally affects women [2], [7], while perpetrators are mostly men [8].

Experiencing NCII has many negative implications on victims' wellbeing and mental health, including high levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and self-harm behaviors [9], [10]. Moreover, societal perceptions of gender-based violence (including the non-consensual sharing of intimate material) can have numerous damaging effects, such as isolation of victims, inaction by authorities and professionals, and the transmission of harmful peer norms [11], [12], [13]. According to the socioecological perspective [14], [15], [16], recognizing NCII as a form of violence is essential not only at the individual level, for victims who need to receive support, but also at the societal and community level, because only a context capable of recognizing abusive behavior can deal with it effectively. In this vein, gender-based violence must be regarded as a leading worldwide public health problem, and people's attitudes toward new forms of such violence, such as NCII, deserve scientific attention.

Literature on gender-based violence has largely shown that some specific psychosocial variables, i.e., rape myths, sexism, and stereotypes about sexuality and manhood, play a key role in attitudes towards the victims, e.g., [17], [18], [19]. Rape myths are defined as false beliefs about violence that promote blaming the victim and exonerating the offender [20]. Over the last decades, beliefs that blatantly blame women have become less publicly tolerable; however, many myths suggesting that the victims did something to cause the abuse are still present, albeit in more subtle forms [21]. Even among college students, the endorsement of rape myths is related to victim blaming in case of gender-based violence [22], [23], [24].

Regarding sexism, several studies with both college students and adults found that those with more traditional and stereotypical perceptions of gender roles are more likely to blame the victim for the abuse than those who hold more non-traditional conceptions [24], [25]. Gender stereotypes contribute to legitimizing violence exerted by the offender, which in turn leads to undervaluing the seriousness of the abuse [26].

Within gender stereotypes, a specific domain is about sexuality. Although there has been a modernization of views on sexuality since the feminist movement emerged (cit?), different rules and values related to sexuality depending on individuals' gender still remain. This is called sexual double standard, which refers to the acceptance of different criteria to conceive and evaluate the sexuality of men and women [27]. Among college students, the sexual double standard is widespread and associated with the justification of violence against women [28], [29], [30]. Past research has shown that people's propensity to perpetrate and/or justify the perpetration of sexually abusive behaviors against women is strongly influenced by their beliefs about what is expected from "real men" [31]. Masculinity can be described as a precarious construct which requires continuous re-assertion [32]. Hence, the abuse of women may serve perpetrators to publicly negotiate their masculine identity, thus preserving their socially dominant position over time [33].

Based on the literature, reported above the current study aimed to extend scientific knowledge on gender-based violence by investigating which psychosocial characteristics are more strictly related to the perception of one of the most recent and widespread form of abusive behavior, i.e., NCII. Specifically, we tested whether the variables usually considered in other studies on gender-based violence (i.e., rape myths, sexism, and stereotypes about sexuality and manhood) play a key role also on attitudes toward the NCII phenomenon of usually referred to as "revenge pornography".

2. The current study

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 309 college students (65.8% female; $mean_{age}$ = 21.95, SD = 2.00; 97.1% Italian) from the University of Turin (Italy). Regarding their academic disciplines, 10.4% were enrolled in Psychology, 9.1% in Engineering, 8.7% in Law, 8.4% in Medicine, 6.1% in Computer science, 5.8% in Languages, 4.5% in Communication studies, 3.9% in Economics, and the remaining 43.1% attended other faculties. Most participants identified as heterosexual (74.1%) and cisgender (97.1%).

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Initial recruitment involved postings by the research team, who spread a web link to an anonymous online survey via web platforms and social networks. Prior to participation, the subjects reviewed an informed consent statement and were informed that their involvement was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time, in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. No compensation was provided. The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Turin (Italy).

Measures

Participants completed some questionnaires that included the following measures:

Beliefs About Revenge Pornography Questionnaire [34]. Two subscales were administered: Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior (10 items, e.g., "An individual who sexts others should expect to be a victim of revenge pornography"; $\alpha = 0.89$) and Offense Minimization (5 items, e.g., "Certain people enjoy lots of individuals looking at intimate pictures or videos of them"; $\alpha = .64$). Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (6).

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory [35], including 6 items (e.g., "Girls should help their mothers at home more than boys"; $\alpha = 0.64$). Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (0) to "completely agree" (5).

The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale [36]. The subscale "She Asked For It", which includes 6 items, was administered (e.g., "If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control"; $\alpha = 0.76$). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (5).

Sexual Double Standard Scale [37]. The subscale "Acceptance of Female Sexual Freedom" was used, comprising 5 items (e.g., "It's okay for a woman to have more than one sexual relationship at the same time; $\alpha = 0.60$). Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (0) to "completely agree" (3).

Precarious Manhood Beliefs Scale [38] which includes 4 items (e.g., "Other people often question whether a man is a 'real man'"; $\alpha = 0.65$). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (7).

Finally, a brief list of socio-demographic questions was presented.

Results

Table 1. Pearson's correlations between study variables.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Avoiding Behavior					
2. Offense Minimization	0.38*				
3. Sexism	0.50*	0.39*			
4. Rape Myths	0.60*	0.50*	0.62*		
5. Female Sexual Freedom	-0.28*	-0.06	-0.22*	-0.23*	
6. Precarious Manhood	0.28*	0.29*	0.35*	0.26*	-0.01

* $p<0.001$

Table 1 shows the correlations between the variables. Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior was positively associated with Offense Minimization, Sexism, Rape Myths, and Precarious Manhood Beliefs, while negatively associated with the Acceptance of Female Sexual Freedom. Similarly, Offense Minimization was correlated with Sexism, Rape Myths, and Precarious Manhood Beliefs, which were all positively associated with one another. In contrast, Acceptance of Women Sexual Freedom was negatively associated with Sexism and Precarious Manhood Beliefs.

T-tests were performed to explore gender differences across all variables. As shown in Table 2 men scored higher than women on beliefs related to revenge pornography, sexism, and rape myths acceptance. However, no gender differences between were observed regarding the acceptance of female sexual freedom and the beliefs about manhood.

Finally, two multivariate regression analyses were performed to predict Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior and Offense Minimization. Regarding attitudes toward the "Avoiding vulnerable behavior" subscale as the dependent variable, as reported in Table 3, the model was significant and explained a substantial proportion of this dimension. Specifically, the endorsement of rape

myths was the strongest predictor, and gender (i.e., being male), Sexism, and Precarious Manhood Beliefs had a positive impact as well. In contrast, the acceptance of female sexual freedom had negatively influenced this dimension.

Table 2. Gender differences across the study variables: means, standard deviations, and T-Test scores.

		Mean	SD	t
Avoiding Behavior	Men	2.41	1.02	-6.69*
	Women	1.72	0.75	
Offense Minimization	Men	2.96	0.79	-6.38*
	Women	2.47	0.54	
Sexism	Men	1.55	0.53	-5.26*
	Women	1.02	0.59	
Rape Myths	Men	1.75	0.82	-7.56*
	Women	1.17	0.32	
Female Sexual Freed.	Men	1.48	0.57	1.13
	Women	1.56	0.53	
Precarious Manhood	Men	3.99	1.36	-1.79
	Women	3.71	1.29	

* $p<0.001$

Table 3. Regression analysis predicting Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior.

	Beta	Standard error	t
Gender (1=M, 2=F)	0.14**	0.09	2.99
Sexism	0.14*	0.08	2.52
Rape Myths	0.39***	0.12	6.52
Female Sexual Freed.	-0.16***	0.08	-3.43
Precarious Manhood	0.11*	0.03	2.35
Adjusted R^2= 0.42	F(5,306)=44.77***		

*** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$

Table 4. Regression analysis predicting Offense Minimization.

	Beta	Standard error	t
Gender (1=M, 2=F)	0.18***	0.07	3.45
Sexism	0.09	0.06	1.38
Rape Myths	0.35**	0.10	5.36
Female Sexual Freedom.	0.05	0.06	0.91
Precarious Manhood	0.15**	0.03	2.84
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.30$	$F(7,326)=27.28$***		

*** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$

As shown in Table 4, the model with Offense Minimization as the dependent variable was significant. As for attitudes toward avoiding behavior, the endorsement of rape myths played a relevant role. Moreover, gender (i.e., being male), and beliefs on manhood were also associated with Offense Minimization.

3. Discussion

The current study aimed at investigating the role of specific psychosocial variables (e.g., endorsement of sexist attitudes, rape myths, sexual double standards, and stereotypes on masculinity) in the perception of NCII, one of the most recent and widespread form of gender-based violence. Results showed that rape myths play a key role since it is associated with both victim blaming (i.e., the idea that the victim could have avoided "risky" behaviors) and moral disengagement (i.e., offense minimization). This suggests that more subtle forms of gender-based violence, such as NCII, share the same psychosocial roots with more explicitly and universally recognized forms, such as rape. Indeed, rape myths may be even more impactful in the case of less explicit violence. They might foster mechanisms of moral disengagement, such as cognitively restructuring harmful behavior (i.e., advantageous comparison with other forms of violence), masking causal agency (i.e., displacement of responsibility), disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences (i.e., distortion of consequences), and denigrating the victims (i.e., attribution of blame) [39], [40].

Similarly, beliefs about precarious manhood impact both dimensions of the NCII perception. From this perspective, non-consensual sharing of intimate material may be perceived as an acceptable way to publicly enhance and/or maintain men's gender status over time [41]. This perception can lead to minimizing the severity of the offence and justifying the perpetrator's actions as a consequence of the victim's behavior.

Instead, sexism and sexual double standards were only related to the dimension of Avoiding Vulnerable Behavior, which implies that the victim is responsible for the abuse to some extent. These findings align with previous literature on the harmful effects of gender stereotypes, even in the sexuality domain [28], [31].

Finally, it is worth noting that gender always takes a central role, as boys tend to blame the victim and minimize damage more than do girls. As Reference [42] shows, image-based sexual abuse is a gendered harm for several reasons. First, regarding victimization, women and girls experience higher levels of online abuse and image-based abuse than men and boys [7]. Second, the majority of images and targets of abuse on dedicated 'revenge porn' websites are female, while most perpretrators and offenders in case of NCII are male [42]. Our findings showed that the perception of such abuse is also clearly gendered.

With specific regard to primary gender-based violence prevention programs, our findings highlighted the need to address individuals' beliefs about rape myths and gender stereotypes in order to de-construct the societal expectations about "normative" feminine and masculine sexuality. Specifically, attention should be paid to how masculine gender roles are performed and perceived by adolescents and young adults, challenging the rigid expectations of what "real men" should be [43]. Hence, qualities such as empathy and mutuality in intimate relationships should be promoted, in order to dismantle the belief that the so-called "communality" (a term that includes multiple dimensions such as empathy, sensitivity, and the propensity to establish intimate connections with others) only attains to the "feminine" sphere [44]. Furthermore, the notion of consent in the digital environment represents a relevant issue, especially in the context of all-male online communities and group chats where most of the intimate material is non-consensually shared through digital platforms [45], [46]. Further research is needed to develop ad-hoc interventions aimed at tackle individuals' moral disengagement related to violence against women, which is related to the minimization of the NCII phenomenon by both perpetrators and bystanders.

The findings of this research should be considered in view of its limitations. Measures mainly focused on heterosexual relationships and female victims; hence, future research should explore the psychosocial correlates underlying NCII perception in the context of non-heterosexual couples and when perpetrated by women against male partners. Moreover, in line with the social-ecological framework described above [14], [16], individuals' perception of NCII, as well as of other forms of online and offline gender-based violence, may vary across cultures, depending on the way traditional masculine norms are intended in different countries [47]. Finally, further research is needed to investigate NCII perception while targeting other potentially relevant variables, such as individual well-being and psychological functioning.

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