Perceptions of Revenge Pornography and Victim Blame

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Abstract

The act of revenge porn occurs when someone (commonly an ex-partner) takes a sexual image and distributes it online without the consent of the individual depicted in the image. Despite new legislation to protect victims, revenge porn impacts many individuals who are faced with a culture of victim blaming similar to other acts of sexual assault. The present study used revenge porn scenarios to evaluate the degree to which individuals blame the victim and whether this is mediated by perceiving revenge porn as a betrayal. Three factors were predicted to affect perceptions of betrayal and blame: victim-perpetrator relationship length (one month or one year), the medium used for sexting (text message or Snapchat) and the perceiver's level of trust in others. The way in which the sexual image was sent did not impact perceived breach of trust or victim blame. The length of the victim-perpetrator relationship did impact victim blame but not perceived betrayal. In line with predictions, those with higher interpersonal trust were found to show less victim blaming which was mediated by their higher perceptions of betrayal in an act of revenge porn. The findings contribute towards future education initiatives to improve outcomes for victims of revenge porn.

Keywords: revenge porn, victim blame, trust, betrayal, victimisation.

Background

Revenge porn (or image-based abuse) is an emerging crime area in which intimate images are shared without the consent of the depicted individual, and with the intention to cause distress (Bloom, 2014). When intimate images are leaked, it is often done by ex-partners who are seeking revenge following a break up, therefore 'revenge porn' is the common term that is used to describe non-consensual distribution of intimate images (Bloom, 2014). However, revenge porn also occurs whereby peers, co-workers, family members or strangers distribute images in order to purposefully cause harm and distress to the victim (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017). Most of the victims are young females, similar to other forms of sexual harassment, however males have also been victims of revenge porn (Branch, Hillinski-Rosick, Johnson, & Solano, 2017). Commonly, images are sent to various social media sites including Facebook, pornographic websites, 'slut-shaming' websites, and revenge porn specific websites such as 'myex.com' (Citron & Franks,

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2014; Henry et al., 2017). A recent study found that one in five Australians have experienced some form of image-based abuse, such as threats to share images in order to receive money or sexual favours (Henry et al., 2017). More specifically, one in ten people have had an intimate image distributed without their consent (Branch et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2017). These prevalence rates justify the need to address revenge porn as a serious concern.

The distribution of an image without consent can have serious consequences for the victim, where the shame and embarrassment of having a personal image made public can further lead to severe distress and anxiety (Citron & Franks, 2014; Franks, 2016). As many as three quarters of individuals who have had their intimate image distributed without consent have experienced psychological distress, including symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (Henry et al., 2017). Some websites exploit victims, by requesting money in order to have the image taken down (Stroud, 2014), but once an image is on the Internet it may reappear anywhere, causing more distress for the victim (Bloom, 2014). Furthermore, since images are often distributed along with personal details of the victim, such as full name, address and links to social media profiles, victims are vulnerable to abuse, stalking, sexual harassment and potentially rape (Citron & Franks, 2014; Waldman, 2017). In recognition of the impact of revenge porn, in August 2018 the Australian Parliament passed legislation aimed at protecting individuals from becoming victim to revenge porn (Reichert, 2018). The laws will help to discourage potential offenders; however it is unlikely that these legislative changes will address the potential for victim blame (Henry et al., 2017; Martin, 2015).

Victim Blame

While research into revenge porn is still developing, there is evidence to indicate that victims are likely to, at least partially, bear responsibility for their images being shared. There are many theories to explain why individuals direct blame towards the victims of sexual abuse. Victim precipitation is a criminological theory suggesting that a crime can be initiated by the behaviour or actions of the victim (Timmer & Norman, 1984). Therefore victim blame often flows from this assumption that the victim was responsible for the crime being acted upon them. For example, a victim of revenge porn may be viewed as responsible for taking and sending an image to someone in the first place. Although, it is important to note that some instances of revenge porn can occur through hacking or unwarranted images being taken by someone else. To ascertain how serious and prevalent victim blaming is, a recent study found as many as 70% of Australians agreed an individual should be wise enough not to take an intimate image, and 62% of participants agreed that someone who sends an intimate image to another person is partially responsible if that image turns up online (Henry et al., 2017). Victim blaming attitudes have a harmful effect on victims of revenge porn and potentially damage outcomes for victims (Martin, 2015). The harassment fuelled by victim blaming arguably makes it difficult for a victim of revenge porn to feel safe to seek assistance from police and/or lawyers, knowing s/he may be judged for the initial action of taking the intimate image (Bothamley & Tully, 2017). Furthermore, where employers, friends or family blame the victim, this is particularly damaging for the victim who is in need of a support system to overcome the wrongdoing. To demonstrate the potential victimisation that results from revenge porn, it is noteworthy to consider the example whereby a victim's parents stated "[the victim] was a whore for doing anything like that online in the first place" (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016, p. 41). In a number of revenge porn cases, victims have lost employment, where others have been required to move state or country in order to escape the harassment and humiliation of revenge porn and victim blaming (Franks, 2016). In

some circumstances, victims have committed suicide due to the bullying and harassment experienced as a victim of revenge porn (Celizic, 2009; Franks, 2016).

Without support programs and education for victim blaming, victims of revenge porn may experience high levels of emotional distress when trying to cope with the situation. Even when approaching police, some victims of revenge porn report being blamed by officers and having been turned away from police assistance due to the incident being perceived as the victim's fault (Citron & Franks, 2014; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). This is not dissimilar to what occurs for victims of rape, who are sometimes blamed for their victimisation despite specialist training within the police force (Sleath & Bull, 2012). It is therefore important to consider the role of victim blame for victims of the emerging crime of revenge porn.

Current Study

Understanding what may decrease victim blaming in the revenge porn context may be a key step in helping to support victims of revenge porn and to reduce the shame and stigma experienced by the victim. Trust (conversely betrayal) appears to underlie the act of revenge porn; when an individual sends an intimate image, he or she trusts the recipient to keep the image private (Bates, 2017; Waldman, 2017). Although the current study did not set out to empirically test any model of trust, the underlying assumptions of trust were based on theoretical principles. Developmentally, it is assumed that trust begins with a baseline (some argue around zero) and develops over time (e.g., Blau, 1964). The formulation of trust within this research has taken a transformational approach, assuming that there is a difference for business and intimate relationships, with intimacy developed across three stages: romantic love, evaluative stage, accommodative stage (Boon & Holmes, 1991). As such, as relationships develop across time, successive stages will be entered.

Research relating to betrayal suggests that trust violation occurs when an individual has acted on personal motives (for example, to deliberately hurt someone), rather than being influenced by situational factors (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Where a perpetrator distributes an image without consent, to hurt the victim (Henry & Powell, 2015), this would therefore be perceived as a breach of trust (Bates, 2017; Burris, 2014; Citron & Franks, 2014; Waldman, 2017). Observing an act of revenge porn could evoke an emotional response for the individual observer, and promote feelings of unfairness, resulting in the observer wanting to punish the perpetrator (cf. victim blame) (Joskowicz-Jabloner & Leiser, 2013). In this research paper we will explore the potential mechanism between *perceived betrayal* and *victim blame*. That is, we suggest three factors that could interfere with perceptions of betrayal and diminish victim blame; namely, the mode of transmission of the image, the length of the victim–perpetrator relationship, and the interpersonal trust exhibited in the observer.

Our first prediction is that the way in which an intimate image is obtained by the perpetrator has the potential to impact the degree to which perceptions of blame and betrayal occur. Sexting, transmitting of sexual material through digital communication (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013), can occur through text messaging and has also been found to occur through the application Snapchat since its launch in 2011 (Gross, 2013; Poltash, 2013). Unlike traditional text messaging, Snapchat senders can choose to send the image for between 1 and 10 seconds before being deleted from the device and the Snapchat server ("Snapchat Support", 2017). When someone chooses to send an image via Snapchat, the sender is trusting that the image will only be viewed by the receiver for a number of seconds and a permanent copy will not be obtained. Snapchat sexting can still lead to revenge porn as the receiver may choose to take a screenshot of the image in order to obtain a permanent copy, however the screenshot is likely to be seen as a

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'deviant' step to obtain a copy of the image (Charteris, Gregory, & Masters, 2016). Revenge porn occurring through Snapchat therefore involves two violations of trust; obtaining a permanent copy of the image without prior consent (via screenshot), and then distributing it without consent. In contrast, if an intimate image is sent by text message, the sender is aware that this mode of delivery allows the receiver to automatically have a permanent copy of the image.

Another factor that may affect perceptions of victim blame and breach of trust is the length of time that the victim and perpetrator have been in a relationship. Trust in intimate relationships will change and build over time, and is considered key to the success of a long-term relationship (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). In the later stages of relationship progression, trust has become more solidified and partners generally feel more secure within the relationship (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). Therefore, more established relationships, of longer duration, would generally have higher levels of trust when compared with casual or short-term relationships (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Considering this, it is logical to suggest that since trust has taken longer to build and develop in a long-term relationship, it would be a greater betrayal if that trust were breached compared to a new relationship (Joskowicz-Jabloner & Leiser, 2013). Furthermore, in the new dating relationship there has not been enough time to build the same degree of trust and therefore the victim may be viewed as naïve and foolish for sending an intimate picture in the first place. It is logical to predict, therefore, that a revenge porn victim would be perceived as having their trust betrayed more by the perpetrator if they had been in a long-term relationship, rather than a short relationship. This would likely lead to a victim of long-term relationship being blamed less than a victim in a new relationship. In contrast to our prediction, Bothamley and Tully (2017) found no significant effect of relationship length on victim blaming in the context of revenge porn, however we noted that relationship length was defined in terms of "a short while" and "a long time" (Bothamley & Tully, 2017). We would argue that defining the relationship length explicitly as either "one month" or "one year" would allow participants to make more meaningful interpretations on the type of relationship. Furthermore, we have chosen to focus on relationship length in the context of trust and betrayal, which was not explored in previous research.

One final factor that we predict is likely to play a role in perceptions of blame and betrayal in revenge porn is the individual level of trust held by the perceiver. Interpersonal trust is defined as the expectancy that the words or actions of others can be counted on, therefore having greater interpersonal trust is related to having more positive expectations about the behaviours of others (Rotter, 1971). Arguably, an individual's own level of interpersonal trust will impact on their judgement of a breach of trust exhibited by others (Gobin & Freyd, 2014). Understanding how interpersonal trust fits within the context of revenge porn is important when considering how legislation might be interpreted to address revenge porn; notably, predicting how police or jurors might react to the betrayal and whether they might blame the victim. Research indicates that individuals with a history of experiencing betrayal and mistrust in others are likely to have low interpersonal trust (Gobin & Freyd, 2014). Based on this finding, it is logical to predict that police officers have experience with vengeful, law breaking people through their experiences with crime, and would therefore have lowered trust in others and negative expectations of the behaviour of others (Ellison, 2004; Stevens, 2017). Other researchers have found that having low trust in others is associated with the tendency to view others as selfish and malicious and therefore we want to understand whether this translates to judgements made about revenge porn victims (Omodei & McLennan, 2000). We predicted that someone with low interpersonal trust would be less alarmed by an act of betrayal, such as revenge porn, as this type of person would already

expect the worst in others. This could lead to blame being attributed to the victim for being foolish enough to trust someone in the first place (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). We argue that having less trust in others (lower level of interpersonal trust) could result in revenge porn being perceived as a less noteworthy breach of trust, and this could consequently lead to increased victim blaming. Whereas someone who generally has trust in others would feel confronted by the behaviour of the perpetrator and be more likely to perceive the act as a betrayal that the victim should not be blamed for.

Aims of the Study

The current study aimed to explore these three factors that may contribute towards victim blame in the context of revenge porn, and whether the relationship between these factors and victim blame are mediated by the perceived breach of trust. Participant responses to fictional revenge porn scenarios were investigated in order to address three predictions. First, whether using an image obtained via Snapchat (cf. text message) for revenge porn would result in victims being blamed less, with perpetrators being regarded as having breached the trust of the victim more so. Second, whether those victims in a longer relationship (one year) would be blamed less than those in a shorter relationship (one month) with the breach of trust being seen to be greater for the longer relationship. Finally, whether an individual's interpersonal trust would impact perceptions of breach of trust and victim blame, such that higher interpersonal trust would result in perceptions of a greater breach and less victim blame.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 186 participants aged between 18-67, with a mean age of 23.91 (SD = 0.80). The majority of the sample was female (75%, n = 139), and Caucasian (88%, n = 163). Approximately half of the sample reported that they had both sent and received an intimate image via text message (47%, n = 86), with slightly more (52%, n = 78) having sent and received intimate images via Snapchat.

Design and Procedure

An online survey was constructed using Qualtrics Software specifically for this study. Participants were randomly assigned to view two telephone conversation scenarios in which a female sent an intimate image of herself to her male partner, via her mobile phone. In one scenario the male and female had been in a relationship for one month and in the other scenario they had been in a relationship for one year; the order for the scenarios was counterbalanced. Therefore, a 2 (message type: text message, Snapchat) × 2 (relationship length: one month, one year) mixed design was used, with message type as the between subjects variable. After viewing each scenario, the participants read text describing how a revenge porn incident had occurred, where the perpetrator had uploaded the image to Facebook. Participants then responded to the perceived breach of trust measure (the predicted mediator variable) and the victim blame measure (the dependent variable). Additionally, all participants responded to the General Trust Scale (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994) measuring interpersonal trust.

Two different images (of the female victim) were chosen from popular blog site *Pinterest* to represent the intimate image sent in the scenario, one for each relationship length level. The images showed a 'selfie' style picture of a girl wearing lingerie, with her body shown from the

neck to the thighs so the face was not visible. The two images were pilot tested on a small group of individuals (n = 5). Both images were rated similarly on level of attractiveness on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated "not very attractive" and 5 indicated "extremely attractive" (Brunette: M = 4.2, SD = 1.3, Blonde: M = 4.2, SD = 0.84). The images were also rated similarly on degree of nudity on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated "not naked" and 5 indicated "extremely naked" (Brunette: M = 3.8, SD = 0.84, Blonde: M = 3.6, SD = 0.55).

Measures

The victim blame scale was adapted from previous research measuring victim blaming of rape victims which was found to have good internal consistency (α = .75) (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003). Mean scores were obtained for each participant, where higher scores on the scale reflected higher blame placed towards the victim of revenge porn. The perceived breach of trust measure consisted of two items: "Sophia feels betrayed by Oliver", and "Oliver broke Sophia's trust", measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree". Mean scores were obtained for each participant, where higher scores reflected that a more severe breach of trust was perceived. Finally, participants also completed the General Trust Scale (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Six items were measured on a 5-point scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". The questions covered various facets of trusting others: "most people are trustworthy", "most people are basically good and kind". A mean score was obtained for each participant where higher scores indicated that the individual is more trusting towards others.

Results

Table 1. *Means (and Standard Deviations) for Victim Blame, across Message Type and Relationship Length*

Message Type	Relationship Length	
	One month M (SD)	One Year M (SD)
Snapchat	3.19 (1.03)	2.97 (0.98)
Text Message	3.12 (1.12)	2.99 (1.16)

A mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was conducted to assess whether the length of the victim-perpetrator relationship (one month, one year) or the type of message (Snapchat, text message) would impact perceptions of revenge porn, namely victim blame (Table 1). There was a significant main effect of relationship length $F(1,184)$ = 28.48, p < .001, *partial* η^2 = .134, which indicates that victims tended to be blamed less when they were in a one-year relationship compared with a one-month relationship, as expected. There was no significant difference, however, between victim blame scores for the Snapchat and text messaging conditions, indicating that the mode of image delivery was inconsequential; $F(1,184)$ = .034, p = .854, *partial* η^2 = .000.

The interaction between relationship length and message type was also not significant $F(1,184) =$ 2.12, $p = .148$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .011$.

Next, a mixed between–within subjects ANOVA was conducted to assess whether breach of trust might play a role in explaining revenge porn; namely, to examine the impact of message type (Snapchat, Text Message) and relationship length (one month, one year) on perceived breach of trust (Table 2). Contrary to our predictions, none of the analyses were significant, indicating that neither the mode of delivery nor length of relationship impacted perceptions of breach of trust; message type, $F(1,184) = 2.140$, $p = .145$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .011$; relationship length, $F(1,184) = 2.145$, $p = .145$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .012$, and interaction, $F(1,184) = 2.598$, $p = .109$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .014$.

Table 2. *Means (and Standard Deviations) for Perceived Breach of Trust across Message Type and Relationship Length*

Message Type	Relationship Length	
	One month M (SD)	One Year M (SD)
Snapchat	6.72 (0.66)	6.83 (0.48)
Text Message	6.66 (0.62)	6.65 (0.65)

Finally, we explored whether interpersonal trust of the individual observer impacted perceptions of blame for the revenge porn victim, and whether this occurred through perceptions of breach of trust. Interpersonal trust, perceived breach of trust, and victim blame were found to be inter-correlated[3], thus meeting the preconditions for mediation analysis. The mediating effect was tested using PROCESS 4 (Hayes, 2013)[4] with message type and relationship length both controlled for. Figure 1 shows the direct effects of interpersonal trust on the mediator (perceived breach of trust) and the dependent variable (victim blame). The analyses revealed a significant indirect effect of interpersonal trust on victim blame through perceived breach of trust, $b = -.13$, SE = .05, [95% CI (–.24, –.05)]. As anticipated, perceived breach of trust was found to mediate the relationship between interpersonal trust and victim blame. Since the direct effect of interpersonal trust on victim blame was not significant, this demonstrates support for full mediation.

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[3] Interpersonal trust had a small, significant correlation with perceived breach of trust for the one-month level of relationship length $r(184) = .162$, $p = .028$ and the one-year level of relationship length $r(184) = .208$, $p = .004$. There was a small, negative correlation between interpersonal trust and victim blame at the one-month level of relationship length $r(184) = -.171$, $p = .020$ and the one-year level of relationship length $r(184) = -.153$, $p = .037$. There was a medium negative correlation between perceived breach of trust and victim blame for both the one-month level, $r(184) = -.347$, $p< .001$ and the one-year level, $r(184) = -.383$, $p<.001$.

[4] PROCESS is a computational tool for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) which permits testing the effect of the independent variable (interpersonal trust), through the mediator (perceived breach of trust), on the outcome variable (victim blame), as well as identifying (relative) indirect, direct and total effects (Hayes, 2013). The analyses were run using a bootstrap estimation of 10,000 samples as suggested by Hayes (2013).

Figure 1. Model Coefficients (Direct Effects) for the Mediated Regression Analysis of the Effect of Interpersonal Trust on Victim Blame through Perceived Breach of Trust
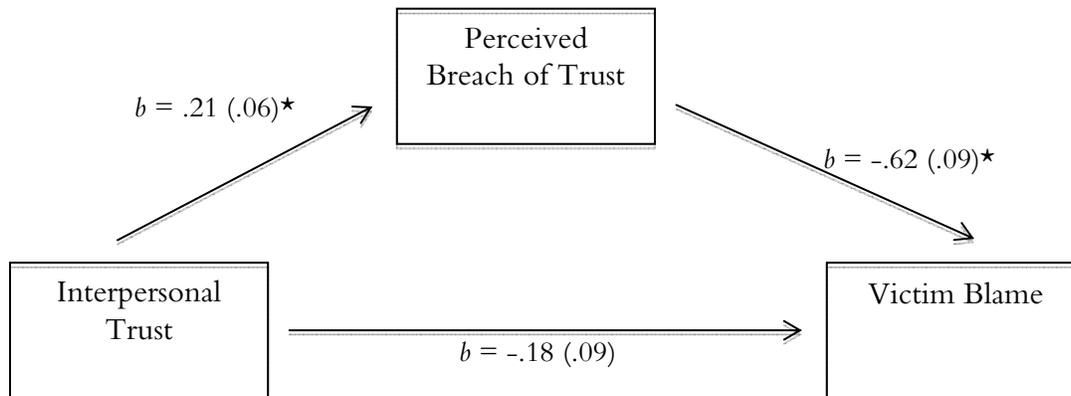
Note b's are unstandardized regression coefficients.
★*p* < .05

Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide insight into how revenge porn might be perceived, particularly which factors contribute to increased victim blame. The length of time the victim and perpetrator had been in a relationship prior to the act of revenge porn directly impacted the degree to which the victim was blamed for her behaviour in the current research. The results suggest that when a victim willingly shares an image early in a relationship, they are blamed more often where that image is then shared by the perpetrator in an act of revenge porn, when compared with where the image is shared later, in a more established relationship. Interestingly, this finding is in direct contrast to the earlier research of Bothamley and Tully (2017), who measured victim blame between subjects, for relationships of "a short while" and "a long time". Contrary to our predictions, the present study found that the way the image was obtained by the perpetrator, through sexting (text message or Snapchat), did not have an effect on victim blame, nor did it impact perceptions of breach of trust by the perpetrator.

To our knowledge, this was the first study to investigate the link between trust, betrayal, and victim blame in the context of revenge porn. Interestingly, when we considered the level of interpersonal trust held by the person adjudicating the revenge porn act, we found that those individuals with higher levels of interpersonal trust were generally more forgiving of all victims, with less victim blame, and that this was explained through mediation by an associated increase in perceived breach of trust (by the perpetrator). This is an important finding which aligns with previous research outside of the revenge porn arena, where individuals with low interpersonal trust have often been found to have a history of betrayal and consequently present as less concerned by observing an act of betrayal given they have learnt to be cynical of others (Gobin & Freyd, 2014; Omodei & McLennan, 2000). In the context of the present research, it would seem that some individuals (e.g., police officers) are likely to be less trusting of others when presented with situations representing betrayal of trust, such as repeated exposure to criminal behaviour and malicious people (Ellison, 2004; Stevens, 2017). In fact, victims of revenge porn have reported

being blamed by police officers when seeking help (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016), reflecting the findings in the current research study. A next step would be to explore the mechanism between trust and victim blame by more explicitly framing it in theory. There are various factors which could be explored, including, but not limited to, consideration of victim similarity. Defensive attribution theory argues that victim blaming decreases as one's similarity with the victim increases, for example, having experience with sexting has been associated with fewer attributions of responsibility directed towards victims of revenge porn (Scott & Gavin, 2018). Therefore, this theoretical framework could be drawn upon to explore the current findings related to interpersonal trust, that is, when people are more trusting of others they can relate to the victim who was trusting the perpetrator with his/her pictures.

A noteworthy limitation of the current study is that the revenge porn scenarios only focused on a female victim and male perpetrator who had been in an intimate relationship, where the female was dressed in lingerie and presented in a static 'selfie' pose. Although revenge porn commonly occurs in heterosexual couples (Branch et al., 2017), it is important to note that real cases of revenge porn are varied. For example, there have been male victims and female perpetrators, same-sex couples, as well as perpetrators being former friends or colleagues motivated by revenge (Henry et al., 2017). It is also noteworthy that the sample in this study was predominantly female and they were observing a female victim, and we know from previous research that a sexual double standard exists where women are judged more harshly and deemed more promiscuous for sexual behaviour than men (Milhausen & Herold, 1999). Furthermore, the intimate images used in this study depicted a female wearing lingerie, however in some real cases of revenge porn the intimate image distributed may be more sexually explicit (such as full frontal nudity or someone performing a sex act) or may be a video of the victim rather than an image (Citron & Franks, 2014). There is also the possibility that the victims will be photographed or videoed without their consent. There have also been cases of strangers hacking into phones and blackmailing victims for money with the threat of distributing the images (Powell & Henry, 2017). Therefore, the findings of this study potentially cannot be generalised to all contexts of revenge porn but indicate a likely outcome for some instances of revenge porn.

This study has nevertheless provided insight into how revenge porn is likely to be perceived, including the degree to which victims might be blamed, and gives a starting point for how to educate potential victims, law enforcement officers and legal professionals about this area. By showing police officers, for example, how their tendencies to distrust others may affect their perceptions of victims of revenge porn, the police could be trained to improve their receptivity towards victims. This is especially important given research has found that sexual assault victims are often concerned that they would be blamed and are ashamed and embarrassed to report to police (Weiss, 2010), and revenge porn is akin to cyber rape. The need to create programs and policies that reduce the stigma and blame experienced by victims of revenge porn and other sexual assault has been widely addressed in both research and the media (Henry et al., 2017; Martin, 2015; Sleath & Bull, 2012; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016).

Conclusion

The current research contributes to a growing area of research on revenge pornography (image-based abuse) and adds to existing literature related to victim blame for sexual assault victims. We have uniquely explored the role of trust and betrayal and how these impact perceptions of revenge porn and victim blame, with promising results. The way in which individual differences, such as interpersonal trust, influence our observations of revenge porn or other sexual abuse should be explored in future research in order to understand and reduce victim

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blaming. These findings are an initial step in assisting with awareness raising, and implementation of programs to help support victims of image-based abuse.

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