

**Revenge pornography and manhood acts: A discourse analysis of perpetrators' accounts**

RUNNING HEAD: REVENGE PORN

**Abstract**

Revenge pornography (hereafter, revenge porn) is the online, sometimes offline, non-consensual distribution, or sharing, of explicit images of someone else by ex-partners, partners, others, or hackers seeking revenge or entertainment - also referred to as non-consensual pornography. The vast majority of revenge porn is committed by men on women ex-partners. In this paper we discursively analyze men's electronic texts accompanying their posting of explicit images on arguably the most popular revenge porn specific website MyEx.com. Situating our analysis as a contemporary form of online gendered violence and abuse, we show the complex ways in which manhood acts are invoked by men to account for their practices. The impacts on victims/survivors and possible interventions are also discussed.

Keywords: discourse analysis, gender violence, masculinity, pornography, revenge porn, social media, ICTs

## **Revenge pornography and manhood acts: A discourse analysis of perpetrators' accounts**

### **Introduction**

In this article we examine, through discourse analytical methods, the relatively new phenomenon of “revenge pornography”, as it has become widely known in contemporary culture. Revenge pornography (hereafter, revenge porn) is the online, sometimes offline, non-consensual distribution, or sharing, of explicit images of someone else by ex-partners, partners, others, or hackers seeking revenge or entertainment<sup>1</sup> – also referred to as non-consensual pornography (NCP) (Franks, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Despite the recent growth of revenge porn it has attracted rather little scholarly attention. Indeed, to our knowledge, previous scholarly work has engaged with revenge pornography within a legalistic (Franks, 2016) and sociological (Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016) frame of reference. However, while there are several possible ways of contextualizing and understanding revenge porn both analytically and politically, here we suggest this phenomenon can to be understood in many instances as gendered online violence and abuse, even if this is not the only possible framework. Indeed, the online survey ‘Effects of Revenge Porn’ (2013)

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<sup>1</sup> There is a variety of definitions of revenge porn (see Hall & Hearn, 2017). For example, the US National Conference of State Legislature (2014) defined it as: “the posting of nude or sexually explicit photographs or videos of people online without their consent, even if the photograph itself was taken with consent. It can follow a spurned spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend seeking to get revenge by uploading photographs to websites, many of which are set up specifically for these kinds of photos or videos.”

<sup>2</sup> An alternative view is that all pornography is revenge pornography (Tyler, 2016).

reported that 90% of victims of revenge porn are women by ranging from teens to early thirties by their ex-male partners. We found similar numbers in our dataset discussed below.

One can place revenge porn within the range of practices of *revenge*, specifically interpersonal revenge. Seen thus, revenge is not new, and is a staple of tragedy in life and art. It is an extension of well-developed strategies and tactics for dealing with, and sometimes coping with, such emotions and social relations as disappointment, loss, punishment, shame, conflict, and antagonism (Berkowitz & Cornell, 2005). Revenge can be material and/or symbolic. It can be direct, involving getting one's presumed 'just' and material deserts, or extracting yet more than that, or it can be more tangential and symbolized in specific textual acts. Practices of revenge, revenge practices, can of course lead onto counter-resistances, revenge to revenge: an eye for an eye, *ad infinitum*.

Revenge porn is also a form of *violence and abuse*. It can be understood as another form of gendered violence and abuse that ranges across femicide, rape, stalking and non-contact harassment (see Blumenstein & Jasinski, 2015 for more on intimate partner violence and femicide). It can also be encompassed within forms of violence and abuse that are not directly or physically on the fleshly body, such as representational violence and non-contact bullying, even though they are likely to have definite negative physical, and indeed psychological and emotional, effects on the violated and the abused. Accordingly, there is

scope for the range of disciplinary and analytical approaches to gendered violence and abuse to be employed in analyzing revenge porn.

Most relevant here is that revenge porn is also gendered violence and abuse that is mainly enacted online, though the media of the internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs) (see Demos, 2016; Ging & O'Higgins Norman, 2016; Jane, 2017; Olson, 2012). Seen thus, it is yet another part of the multifarious possibilities for virtual/online socialities, sexualities and violences, such as cyberabuse, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online aggression, 'happy slapping' or trolling (Hearn & Parkin, 2001). ICTs have a number of distinctive features: time/space compression of distance and physical separation, instantaneousness in real time, asynchronicity, reproducibility of images, creation of virtual bodies, blurring of the 'real' and the 'representational'. More specifically, the affordances of computerized communication networks include: broader bandwidth; wireless portability; globalized connectivity; personalization (Wellman, 2001); and blurrings between online and offline, codex and net (Mays & Thoburn, 2013). Revenge porn exploits those characteristics and elaborates them in all sorts of ways, with open-ended and undefined possibilities and effects.

This raises more and more complex issues, for example, how revenge porn can be simultaneously embodied and virtual, is irreducible to one form or possibility, may be multi-medial, and may only be understandable in the context of the range of social practices beyond the visible and readable revenge porn text. For example, a particular revenge porn posting may reference, implicitly or explicitly, another earlier topic or

social occasion offline and off-screen, positive or negative, for one, both or more parties, that would be not decipherable by an uninvolved party or viewer. Specific instances of revenge porn may also be part of a chain of events, occurrences, times and places beyond itself.

Moreover, revenge porn can be seen in terms of the processual nature of the interactive Web, in which 'producers', 'prosumers' and other hybrids create the Web interactively (see Whisnant, 2010, for further discussion in relation to the production and consumption of pornography), as evidenced in do-it-yourself pornography, selfies, celebrity selfies, naked selfies, sexting, reality media, online lives, neknominate (drinking) challenges, and the rest. Sexting, whether one-way or mutual, (and indeed sexting panic) (Hasinoff, 2015), has become more widespread, providing more online naked and sexual images for possible re-(ab)use, though the scale of this amongst young people should not be overstated (Martellozzo et al., 2016). While some forms of electronic pornography such as sexting may be considered consensual, Ringrose et al.'s (2012) interview and focus group study of sexting show it is often coercive and is often linked to peer-pressure, harassment, bullying and even violence. Online revenge porn can also be understood as exemplars of novel and unfinished forms of online violences, violations, sexual violences, and indeed sexualities.

Arguably, there are also possible cultural links here with various other contemporary phenomena such as online gaming, the seduction industry (O'Neill, 2015), and even men's rights movement and associated trolling; these may be relevant as part of the broad cultural background;

however, they were not present as themes in the revenge porn material that we have discursively analyzed below.

Finally, but fundamentally, revenge porn can be seen as gender, gendered, sexual, gender-sexual practices. In these perspectives, revenge porn may be interpreted as structured action, resulting from the gender-sexual social order and social structures, sometimes called patriarchy, and/or as a way of doing gender, doing sexuality or doing gender/sexuality performatively. Either or both ways, it is part of the gender-sexual matrix, dominantly heterosexual, that (re)produces gender categorizations and places them into effect. The possible overlapping, and non-prioritization, of gender over sexuality, and indeed vice versa, noted here is part of the actual and potential instability of the two categories. This is made explicit in some versions of queer theory or queer feminism, whether as theoretically inspired by Foucault or Butler or driven by direct subversive political action.

Having said that, as gendered, or intersectionally gendered, or gender-sexual practices, revenge porn appears to be most often and mainly a matter of the practices of *men and masculinities* (Connell, 1995) or similar concepts, such as *manhood acts* (Schwalbe, 2013). They thus can be instances of patriarchal, sexist, hegemonic and dominant forms, and complicit, subordinated, marginalized, ambivalent, resistant and counter-patriarchal forms. This is certainly not to stereotype such practices, but to see men's practices of revenge porn, and the discourses employed within and around them, as part of the diverse repertoires of men and masculinities, and in this sense perhaps less novel, less original,

than they may appear to some or in some debates. In this view, revenge porn is less about the specific and rapidly changing affordances of ICTs, and more about gendered-sexual positions, positionings and possibilities within current gender-sexual orders.

We see revenge porn as both the combination of these perspectives – online gendered-sexual violent abusive pornographic revenge practices – whilst more specifically we focus in our analysis on the last mentioned, namely, practices of men and manhood acts (Schwalbe, 2013), given that girls and women are predominantly the victims/survivors of revenge porn. As such, we seek to bring together analysis of violence, gender, sexuality, and online communication (also see Hall & Hearn, 2017). While there are many approaches to such assemblages, for example, from different disciplinary perspectives, such as media studies or sexuality studies, emphasizing different elements, we see a virtue in keeping their close co-construction in view, by way of focusing on practices of men and manhood acts, specifically the posted revenge porn written texts

## **Data and method**

### *Method*

In this paper we draw on discourse analysis (Potter, 1997). Broadly speaking, discourse analysts aim to explore how “versions of world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse” and so there is “a concern with participants” constructions and how they are accomplished and undermined” (Potter, 1997, p. 146). In other words, versions of the world are worked up during conversational interaction –

including online electronic talk. The relevant version(s) of the world depend on the topic of conversation (e.g. revenge), who one is conversing with (e.g. other porn revenge consumers), the context (e.g. warning, bragging), location (e.g. social media) and time (e.g. current trend). Our analysis followed three steps (Baker, 1997): locating the central themes that are named and/or implied in the talk; focusing on the discursive activities within each section; and examining how respondents constructed accounts, produced descriptions, managed stake (interest), blamed victims and framed specific activities. What this means is that particular aspects of talk (e.g. identity construction, giving instructions, providing accounts and so on) are emergent from the texts and not analyst-centered interpretations. Therefore, these aspects of talk are only readable from the text because the people can be seen as orientating to them. Thus, texts are not readable as absolute 'truths' but versions and performances of events. We followed this approach in exploring our textual data.

### *Data*

Our dataset is drawn from the Internet site MyEx.com: arguably the most extensive revenge porn specific site found on the web boasting more than 12,000 explicit images and videos with accompanying text. Founded in 2013, the MyEx.com service and website owned by Web Solutions B.V, Netherlands, provides people across national boundaries with a facility to anonymously upload and share images, videos and text of ex-partners and other people they know for the apparent purpose of getting revenge. Unlike other online revenge porn sites, MyEx.com provides both posters

and viewers with the ability to engage with the material they encounter through the computer-mediated communication channel, namely, comments.

Like other revenge porn websites such as Expic.net, My Fucking Ex-Girlfriend and Revenge Net, the majority of MyEx.com posts are of women by men. Although posts are anonymous, it was clear from much of our data when contributors were male. Male indexing occurred through male references (“blokes”, “dude”, “guys”, “boys”), positioning in relation to female partners (“wife”, “missus”, “girlfriend”) and invoking typical masculine markers (fatherhood: “my kid”; heterosexual promiscuity: “your wife dude”) (Miller, 2008). These are treatable as “male” even without this identity being “named out aloud” (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998, p. 4).

The general aim of our data collection process was to identify the different ways in which men accounted for publicly displaying sexually explicit images, movies and text of their ex-partner in revenge seeking. We employed the following framework and reviewed the posts according to the following stages: 1) identifying relevant texts by examining title and accompanying text; 2) text selection according to explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria (English, non-consensual, about a former intimate partner cheating, posts by those orientating to male heterosexuality ; and 3) Discursively analysing the data.

We coded the remaining 4418 posts by men explicitly revenge seeking with NVivo. We created a list of key words and phrases depicting the various types of gender violences and abuses (see GOV.UK, 2013 for a

detailed list), such as: physical; sexual; emotional; psychological; spiritual; cultural; verbal; financial; and neglectful.

In addition to this we developed codes around the different traditions and perspectives we discussed above: revenge as pornography, interpersonal revenge, violence and abuse, information and computer technologies, publicizations and gender-sexual practices. The emergent themes were: intimate partner control, the sexualization of women, sexual promiscuity, the prostitution of women, and the loss of fatherhood.

Clearly many posts contained several, and often competing, discourses. Since we are unable to present all posts here, we randomly selected an exemplar where each of these discourses was drawn on by the poster (not necessarily all in the same post). For these we aimed to examine how posters constructed accounts, gave descriptions, managed their stake in revenge porn and so on, for what they can tell us about their motives. That is, the text is analysed for its individual parts as well as a sequential whole. There are numerous elements of talk that are traceable in participants' talk. These are discussed individually where participants have made them relevant and orientated to them.

### **Ethical Issues**

Before working with these data we sought and received university ethical approval. Collecting data from the Internet typically presents ethical challenges around what is deemed a 'public' or 'private' space (Hookway, 2008; Rodham & Gavin, 2006; Walther & Boyd, 2002). One obvious issue is whether informed consent can be gained. Scholars (Hookway, 2008;

Rodham & Gavin, 2006; Walther & Boyd, 2002) argue that every effort should be made to obtain consent even in open access online websites. Given that the images, text and video are posted anonymously, gaining consent from each poster would be almost impossible without substantial detective work, as would be consent from victims. Yet privacy issues are still applicable for those whose images are posted on MyEx.com and similar sites. We therefore, only draw on the text, and in line with British Psychological Society (2013) guidelines, we have anonymised our dataset as far as possible (e.g. omitting biographical data and replacing names with A1 [Anonymous 1], A2 etc.) and removing any in-text personal details, vernaculars or references. We also do not draw upon, or reproduce, any of the visual material since we do not want to further compromise the dignity of those pictured, even though that restricts some kinds of analysis and interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

## **Results**

Power, control and (hetero)sexuality were the main underlying themes throughout our analysis. What linked all the posts we encountered was victim blaming – the men diffusing culpability and responsibility by presenting themselves as aggrieved in some way. In other words, the posters seem to be ‘retaliating’ for some felt misdemeanor by their (ex)partner. In each example, the woman is cited as ‘guilty’ for either controlling in their relationship by various means (e.g. monitoring or

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<sup>3</sup> This is even though in some instances meanings are conveyed through the interaction of visual material and written text.

withholding sex or sexual promiscuity) or taking control by leaving. Some men presented themselves as deeply hurt, whilst others seemed to present this as no big deal. What was clear however was that posting sexually explicit images represented is a perception of regaining control. In other words, all of these posts can be 'compensatory manhood acts'. That is, the posting of explicit images of these women, then, becomes a way to overcompensate, to protect/rehabilitate the men's manhood, and to hurt/control the women in question (or the men connected to those women).

We begin our analysis by looking at intimate relationship control in an extract posted in 2013 not long after MyEx.com had been founded:

*Intimate partner control*

A1

"My Ex"

Anonymous says:

Recently broke up because I was too controlling apparently, well I wouldn't check her phone or tell her to close her fb<sup>4</sup> if she didn't flirt with every guy!!! As she is now done with me, no point keeping these to myself.

It is clear that A1 claims his ex-partner ended their relationship because he was "too controlling". Although A1 disbelieves this accusation "apparently" we get a sense with his use of "too" that A1 sees some level of control was acceptable. This notion fits with work by Dutton (2007), and Franklin and Menaker (2014) on gender power in intimate relationships. What they point to is the mirroring and reproducing of patriarchal power in society in intimate relationships (Stark, 2009), "so that men are charged with decision-making and authority" (Franklin & Menaker, 2014, p. 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Fb - Facebook

Ergo, this implies that some men (and women) may find some forms of intimate relationship control as inevitable and normative. This is further cemented in this extract by A1 “check her phone or tell her to close her fb” (fb: Facebook), which is accounted for by accusing her of flirting “with every guy!!!” As Anderson and Umberson (2001, p. 359) point out, some men attempt to control women who don’t meet their “unspoken physical, sexual or emotional needs” – including being friendly with other men. What’s also interesting is that although A1 positions his partner as the one in control since she is the one who ended their relationship “As she is now done with me”, he doesn’t use this as the reason for posting the explicit photos. This may indicate that A1 sees the possibility of some viewers’ seeing posting pictures of his ex-partner as vindictive, so undermining his suggestion that he is the victim rather than the perpetrator (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 158). What he does instead is work up an account where privacy is only applicable within the confines of an intimate relationship; once the relationship has ended he has the ‘right’ to make public for others to consume what he consumed in person and private. This commodification of her body works to mask the violence of posting non-consensual images by establishing this as an acceptable form of revenge and homosocial exchange between men (Whisnant, 2010).

In the following extract intimate relationship control is perceived as undertaken by his ex-partner but this is critiqued as gender non-normative:

A2

“4/10”

Anonymous says:

Stuck up, frigid, boring bitch who knew nothing about sex and tried to control every aspect of my life. I couldn't even go out with my friends because she was so needy and clingy that she made me spend all of my time with her. I wanted to break up with her after not even a year but didn't until like 2 and a half years later. She'd search through my Facebook, my texts, etc. Seriously annoying and childish. Small, low hanging boobs, massive nose and attitude problems. Thinks she is a LOT prettier than she is. Couldn't do anything in the bedroom and would never spice things up in the slightest.

In this extract A2 claims he was the one who ended the relationship “I wanted to break up with her after not even a year but didn't until like 2 and a half years later”. In doing so A2 is obliged to provide an account for this since he has posted explicit images of his ex-partner. He does this initially with a three-part list of character-related critiques “stuck up”, “frigid” and “boring”. Jefferson (1991) showed that the presence of three items on a list adds clarity and weight to arguments. Similarities can be seen between A1's account of her as controlling and sexually promiscuous and A2's account of the relationship breakup as ‘her’ poor sexual performance “knew nothing about sex” and apparent attempt to “control every aspect of my life”. Both posters can be seen to work up an account in which their “physical, sexual or emotional needs” have not been met (Anderson & Umberson, 2001, p. 359). Thus, in both posts the women are presented as not fulfilling their normative gendered and sexuality roles in which he can experience the control over them that he is entitled to (Whisnant, 2010, p. 127). Indeed, this is further observable in A2's additional three-part list of critiques of her body “Small, low hanging boobs, massive nose”, which fits with previous scholars' research in

which some men expect subordination of the use of women's bodies and their appearance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Johansson & Hammarén, 2007). Given pornography viewers tend to be viewed predominantly by men (Weitzer, 2011), A2's account can be read as being constructed not only in masculine terms for a predominantly male audience but like A1, violence is masked and a homosocial exchange between men is established.

Similarly, to A2 the following two extracts work up notions of gender and sexuality expectations, albeit differently:

*Sexualising women*

A3

"(name omitted) the Hoe"

Anonymous says:

This waist [sic.] of Oxygen is my ex of 15 years. She has been cocked more times than John Wayne's Gun. She has been shot over more times than Bagdad. She has seen more loads than your Mums Washing Machine. Enter at your own Risk!

This text is simultaneously readable as boastful talk of sexual activity but also talk about an ex-partner's sexual infidelity. The latter is immediately readable from the disparaging term applied to her in the title "Hoe" but also in the warning to others "Enter at your own Risk!" Schulz's (1975) historical analysis of derogative terms applied women and girls shows that "Hoe" (whore) is a term typically applied to heterosexually promiscuous women (see also Winkler Reid, 2014, on the construction of women as 'slags'). Combined with the warning "Enter at your own Risk!" which is readable as heterosexual "Enter", suggests A3 is male and is speaking to a male audience.

A3 presents as fact a three-part list (Jefferson, 1991) of sexual activities that have been done to the woman “she has been cocked”, “she has been shot over” and “she has seen more loads”. This works to both raise his masculine status by suggesting that ‘he’ is the one that has done these things to her. However given that this post is also a warning, his masculine status might be challenged without him providing a reason for the breakdown of their “15 years” relationship since other readers might interpret these sexual acts as done by other(s). What A3 does to try and avoid this interpretation is construct his account as ‘humorous’: “cocked more times than John Wayne’s Gun”, “shot over more times than Bagdad” and “seen more loads than your Mums Washing Machine” (see Benwell, 2004 for more on how men use humour as a deflection strategy). In other words, the sexual humour works to position him as the ‘doer’ of these sexual acts because it portrays him as less emotively invested. A3’s deployment of ‘jokey’ humour also works to present him as one of the lads (albeit a more mature one since his age is referenced with his knowledge of John Wayne) and so his responsibility for any harm caused to the woman by posting explicit images of her is diffused. That is, this is normative behavior for men whether they produce or consume this type of material, and so he is not to blame (Whisnant, 2010, p.122).

In the following extract heterosexual men’s promiscuity is normalized with the addition of point scoring against another man. This can also be seen in men’s violence against women (Hearn, 1998).

*Sexual promiscuity*

A4

"Your wife dude"

Anonymous says:

I had an affair with this lady for over two years. But her sneaky husband kept following us around, trying to take photos of us together. He threatened to expose our relationship. In the end I got so annoyed I ended it. So here you are dude your wife and the photos you never got to take. She had never given a full blowjob before she met me her husband was super uptight I left her as a cock sucking anal queen.

It is immediately clear from the title that A4 has had some form of relationship with another man's "wife". In A4's description of his affair two aspects are marked out. Firstly, that the woman he had an affair with was a "lady". The selection of a category carries important implications for how the text is read. Edwards (1998, p. 25) argues that these categories carry 'potentially useful conventional associations with age, marital status, and potential sexual availability' such that "lady" infers she is respectable (Stokoe, 2003, p. 331). It could also convey literally, ironically or sarcastically that she is smart, sensible or selective, or specifically not these. Secondly, his marker of time suggests that this was not purely sexual but that they were emotionally involved. In working up this position he is able to position himself as the victim of "her sneaky husband" who "threatened to expose" them, which suggests A4 was also cheating on someone. Threatening to expose them positions the "sneaky husband in a position of power and indeed the outcome was that the affair was "ended". A4's posting explicit images of his ex-partner is readable as a way to re-empower himself and this can be seen in the sexual acts he claims to she has done "given a full blowjob" "anal queen" with him and not with her husband. The graphic detail of the sexual acts also works to

position him as sexually powerful (and her weak) vis-à-vis her husband since he was able to get her to do things she might not have done with her husband; visible in his downgrading of her from a “lady” to a “cock sucking anal queen”. Whilst the selection “lady” infers respectability and modesty, “cock sucking anal queen” infers “frivolity” and “sleaziness” (Stokoe, 2003, p. 331). This ‘category, predicate and task’ (Hester & Eglin, 1997) in switching from “lady” to “cock sucking anal queen” functions to downgrade the overall victory of her husband in keeping his wife, whilst claiming victory over her husband in the sexual acts he had with his wife, a theme of cuckolding familiar to Shakespeare.

In the following extract A5 turns his ex-partner’s same-sex cheating as positive. In doing, so we can see a different dimension to heterosexual masculinity.

A5

“Bisexual”

Anonymous says:

I found my girlfriend masturbating over these pics. When she left her iPhone lying about I downloaded them all. This blonde was trying to get my girl into bed. I had no idea my girl was bisexual. So all being well she is going to set up a FFM for me with a younger playgirl to join us. But I was annoyed that this older lady was sending my girl photos of herself. If you send pics into cyber space you have no idea where they may end up.

What’s interesting in this post about cheating is that the victim is not the poster’s “girlfriend” but rather, an “older lady” who is reported to have sexually aroused his partner “I found my girlfriend masturbating over these pics”. He positions the victim as a lesbian predator “This blonde was trying to get my girl into bed” by “sending my girl photos of herself” in order to account for his actions. What’s also evident is that it is his taste in

women, age and sexual preference that is key “set up a FFM for me with a younger playgirl to join us” (FFM: female, female, male sexual encounter). As such, homosexual infidelity is presented as acceptable as long as the victim concurs with the perpetrator’s choice of partner, which fits with previous research showing some heterosexual men tending to have a ‘more positive prejudice’ toward lesbians in sexual contexts (Herek, 2000, p. 262; Pichastor et al., 2009). Given the popularity of lesbian pornography for some heterosexual male consumers (Webber, 2013), one might suspect that this post also serves to raise A5’s homosocial status with male viewers providing him with a ‘real man’ affirmation (Whisnant, 2010).

We suspected women’s sex and sexuality would feature highly given the focus of the website but we were somewhat surprised how openly some men were discussing their own sexual promiscuity.

A6

"nasty girl"

Anonymous says:

After 6 year relationship I started cheating on her, when she found out cause massive problems with me and friends. I’m sure she gave me an STD, stay away and be happy.

A6’s title clearly shows his disapproval or dislike of his former partner. Interestingly he begins by discussing his own extra-relationship affair(s). It is interesting to note that A6 makes the time of his relationship relevant “After 6 years”, which indexes how the rest of the text is to be understood (see Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998 for more on the relevance of indexing and occasioning in talk). That is, by deduction, he was faithful for 6 years before he “started cheating on her”. We can only speculate as to his

reasons, but what the marker of time does is minimize the impact of his action, a relativizing strategy used in men's accounts of physical violence to women (Hearn, 1998). In other words, cheating after 6 years is perhaps not as bad as after 1 year. When people provide accounts for their actions they must select, construct and manage for 'stake' (i.e. their personal interest). As Edwards and Potter (1992, p.158) point out:

Anyone who produces a version of something that happened in the past, or who develops a stretch of talk that places blame ... does so at the risk of having their claims discounted ... participants should be thought of as caught in a dilemma of stake or interest: how to produce accounts which attend to interests without being undermined as interested.

What's interesting is that he does not provide an account of why he started "cheating on her" only that it was "After 6 years". In doing so A6 normalises his action. That is, sexual promiscuity is represented as normative for men (see Murnen, Wright & Kaluzny, 2002 for more on gender, social norms and sexuality). Additionally, he makes relevant the consequences when she found out "cause massive problems with me and friends". His use of "massive" suggests he thought her reaction was perhaps excessive. Interestingly, A6 culminates his post by accusing his ex-partner of being unfaithful and giving him a sexually transmitted disease "I'm sure she gave me an STD, stay away and be happy". This acts as a part-account for his own cheating by implying that she was promiscuous, but also that like A3 that his ex-partner is frivolous. This might also suggest both that he is generous, and that he does not value her.

In the following extract sexual competitiveness is linked to finance and status.

*Prostituting women*

A7

"(location omitted) Mistress"

Anonymous says:

(name omitted) was a kept girl by a (location omitted) businessman. He bought her a sports car; put her up in a fancy apartment. She had to be on call for him every Monday. He wanted her to get a vajazzle and do all the kinky stuff he basically paid her for. She saw me on the side, but in the end chose the cash and the lifestyle. Guess that's the way it goes, but she was a great fuck.

Unlike A4, A7 isn't claiming victory "in the end she chose the cash and the lifestyle" in his competition for the "Mistress". A7 categorises (Sacks, 1992) the other man as a "businessman" which invokes notions of money and power since he able to purchase expensive items for the "Mistress" "bought her a sports car; put her up in a fancy apartment". One might suspect that his lost 'battle' with the businessman challenges and demotes A7's homosocial status. However, in avoiding this A7 presents himself as not emotionally invested with the woman worked up by presenting her as a sexual commodity - a prostitute. In return for the businessman's gifts he claims she "had to be on call for him every Monday. He wanted her to get a vajazzle<sup>5</sup> and do all the kinky stuff". Notice the use of the extreme-case formulation "every" "all" "he basically". The poster downgrades "he basically" and upgrades "every" "all" - such extreme-case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) - are ways of referring to events and objects by invoking minimal or maximal properties. What this does is reduce the basis for others to search for an

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<sup>5</sup> Vajazzle is a form of genital decoration by the application of crystal ornaments on the shaved pubic region.

account. Pomerantz's (1986, pp. 219-220) work showed that people use extreme-case formulations in adversarial situations and when they anticipate others undermining their claims or to propose that some behaviour is not right (or wrong) especially if it can be regarded as frequently occurring "every Monday". Or, as Potter (1997, p. 61) points out, accounts are often provided for dispreferred actions, so that if an action is not the preferred action of the actor then a reason for such action may be required. Therefore, we can see that A7's use of these extreme-case formulations proposes that she 'should not' have chosen the businessman over him. However, A7 does anticipate that some viewers may still need an account, and so provides a justification with a three-part list (Jefferson, 1991) for his claim that she is a prostitute "on call" "get a vajazzle" and "do...kinky stuff". A7's downgrading of her serves to minimize the businessman's hollow victory and the relevance of money, but also that he is not/was not emotionally involved with her "Guess that's the way it goes", again emotionally distancing himself from her.

Whilst A7 presents himself as blasé, A8 on the other hand is quite open about the emotional impact of the relationship.

A8

"nasty woman!!!"

Anonymous says:

This woman is a nasty lying piece of work, she led me on to bleed me dry of money then put me into a false sense of security then abandoned me when I was ill, I now have panic disorder and anxiety from what she put me through.

A8 claims he is seeking revenge because he was she attempted to con him "bleed me dry of money" and eventually rejected him "abandoned me". We can see that her reported intention "she led me on [in order] to

bleed me dry” was unsuccessful because as Edwards (2008, p. 177) points out, intentions are “tied to circumstances in which the intended actions are in some way balked, unfulfilled, or a departure from expectation”. Since A8 implies she was not successful in conning him he is required to provide an account of his action to post onMyEx.com (Potter, 1996). He does this by positioning himself as vulnerable “I was ill” and detailing the impact this has had on him “I now have panic disorder and anxiety from what she put me through”. What is interesting is that by laying bare his vulnerabilities he is able to portray her as heartless whilst simultaneously maintaining his financial status.

The last extract that we present draws on fatherhood as justification for blaming the victim.

#### *Lost fatherhood*

A9

"My Slut ex who has ruined my life!"

Anonymous says:

She took my kids, ruined my life and now bitches about me to everyone since the divorce.

What is immediately noticeable in A9’s post is that his ex is categorized as a “Slut” (see Stokoe, 2003 for more on the construction of the ‘slut’ in discourse). This category is associated with the category predicate of ‘being sexually promiscuous’ and as such acts to provide an account of why he is posting in MyEx.com (Hester & Eglin, 1997). Indeed, *being* posted at all on such a site might in itself suggest such to a male audience or be intended to do so. A9 provides an additional justification for his actions with a three-part list of her reported misdemeanors “took my kids”, “ruined life!” and “bitches about me”. What’s implied here is that

both his private and public life have been “ruined” since he has lost living with the “kids” and she “bitches” to “everyone” (Pomerantz, 1986). This was the only example we came across that implied the poster’s masculine identity had been challenged by the loss of living with their children. Like many of the extracts that we have read and presented here the poster positions themselves as the victim rather than the person who has had explicit pictures of them posted in cyberspace. Thus he is able to take the moral high ground whilst also presenting his activity as normative masculine behavior and also whilst establishing a homosocial exchange with other men: any undermining of his sense of a masculine self can be reclaimed presenting himself as a ‘real man’ (Whisnant, 2010).

## **Discussion**

We began this article by highlighting how revenge porn can be understood as a relatively new form of gendered violence and abuse. Specifically, we approach revenge porn as combining violence, gender, sexuality, and relatively new forms of online communication, whilst focusing our analysis on practices of men and manhood acts. Thus, our analysis has focused on how men accounted for – and justified – posting explicit images of women (mostly ex-partners) on the online revenge website MyEx.com. Most men in our dataset claimed the women deserved being posted because they were reported to have controlled the relationship, committed infidelity, passed on an STD, stolen money or committed sexual acts in return for money, and stolen ‘his’ children, thus constructing online pornography as, in their own terms, a legitimate form of interpersonal revenge. In some

cases, men could be seen to position themselves as the wronged victims in seeking revenge: in other words, positioning the ex-partner as the perpetrator of a form of gender violence and abuse. We showed that many of these reported or alleged misdemeanors are linked, even tied, to and invested in masculinized, hierarchical, heterosexual, intimate relationships, fatherhood and financial contexts. Indeed, it is arguable that the loss of personal power in the men's relationship was a means of felt emasculation. Overall, revenge was reported positively by at least some men posters as a supposedly equalizing action downplaying any culpability.

To our knowledge, our study is the first to examine how revenge pornography operates from a psycho-social perspective focusing on how men account for posting sexually explicit images of their ex-partners online. From this analysis, we recognize two main 'logics' in men's accounting. One is based in men's responses to perceived grievance and loss of control, ranging from loss of external control *over the woman* to loss of personal control of *the man's own status*, for example, in relation to fatherhood. The second 'logic' is based in men's (excessive, non-consensual) sexualization of the woman, ranging from *general or abstract sexualization* of the woman to *specific, concrete sexualization* of the woman, for example, framing her in terms of particular instances of promiscuity or prostitution. In some cases, the loss of control, the perceived grievance, appears not to be specifically related to sexuality and sexualization, so that pornographic sexualization is initiated as part of the revenge itself; in other instances, the loss of control is linked more

directly to sexuality and sexualization, so that the revenge uses a similar mode as the perceived source of loss, the perceived grievance.

We also see some similarities between our analysis and studies of gender violences in (online) pornography (Dines, 2010; Hearn, 2006; Hughes, 2002), in which women are sexually commodified and degraded. However, while the broader pornographization of contemporary culture (Attwood, 2009) is certainly relevant as a backdrop to the rise of online revenge porn, we do not equate revenge porn and commercial pornography, and see significant differences. Rather, the structuring of revenge pornography fits more closely with the much wider range of studies that examine the multifarious computer-mediated communication possibilities for virtual/online, gendered socialities, sexualities and violences (Hearn & Parkin, 2001). What is often common across these perspectives is the relative invisibility of the perpetrator, that is, violences can be committed without the identity of the perpetrator being revealed. This relative invisibility is complicated by the fact that the victim is known but at a distance and *not seen*, so that the impact and consequences of action are not immediate. Interestingly, there is also some evidence of greater propensity and power to insult and abuse, when there is less facial or eye contact (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). In such ways, one might characterize some revenge porn as cowardly violence and abuse, with unpredictable outcomes discontinuous in time and space. In addition, the revenge porn may be directed to various possible audiences: the women in question, their intimates or associates, to the man's own friends, an undefined viewing 'public'.

From a victim-centered perspective (largely of the women), the posting of explicit (pornographic or similar) images by others is fraught with unknown psycho-social outcomes for the victim, and so could and should be challenged. Although there has been some success in bringing down some specific 'revenge porn' sites (e.g. Pink Meth, Texxxan.com, IsAnyoneUp.com), more domestic and international legal or regulatory controls could be implemented. Indeed, websites may be operated in one country, be hosted in another, but have a global reach. Websites, such as MyEx.com, that operate in the surface web could legally be required to collect posters' details before they post explicit images and/or honour their commitment to remove any inappropriate conduct: "any activity that is harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, tortious, invasive of another's privacy or otherwise objectionable to any third party or in any way violates a third party's (or the Company's) rights" (MyEx.com, 2017, April 12, <http://www.myex.com/terms-of-use/>).

Outside legalistic frameworks (or with legal or regulatory controls) other characteristics such as gender could be leveraged to discourage posting explicit images, for example using notions of self-control or dignity. The media may also have a role to play in showing the complex ways in which victims are hurt and this could be leveraged by the experiences of recent high profile film stars.

Although our study works with original, naturalistic data around a relatively new but poorly understood phenomenon, we recognize that our study is preliminary and that much more research is required with both victims and perpetrators of revenge pornography. Moreover, in contrast to

public posts online, one-to-one interviews would allow perpetrators (largely men) time and space to account for their actions in detail and victims (largely women) to record their experiences in confidence. Finally, we know little about how this phenomenon differs for age, culture, ethnic and socio-economic groups, including homosocially, so a study of these likely variations would be recommended.

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