



Not ‘revenge porn’, but abuse: let’s call it image-based sexual abuse by ?@McGlynnClare & @erikarackley

Over the last few years, we have become very familiar with the term ‘revenge porn’ to describe the growing phenomenon of vengeful ex-partners distributing private, sexual images without the consent of their former partners. In recognition of the humiliation, distress and real pain this practice causes, countries across the world, including [England & Wales](#), have introduced new criminal laws to try to deter and punish such behaviour. And [Scotland](#) is currently debating whether to reform its law.

However, while the language of ‘revenge pornography’ has certainly worked to secure the attention of the media and policy-makers, it’s time for new terminology: *image-based sexual abuse*.

[Image-based sexual abuse](#) better captures the nature and harms of the non-consensual creation and distribution of private sexual images. Unlike ‘revenge porn’, it captures both the broad range of practices being challenged and to convey the nature and extent of the harms suffered by victims.

What’s in a name?

Terminology frames options for legal redress, as well as playing a vital expressive role in our public debates. A major purpose of the criminal law is to express societal condemnation of specific practices with the hope of changing people’s behaviour. The law can only achieve these purposes if the label applied to a crime is the right one. And ‘revenge pornography’ is the wrong one.

Why? First, ‘revenge porn’ covers just one form of image-based sexual abuse, that is when an ex-partner non-consensually shares private sexual pictures or videos to exact ‘revenge’ on a former partner. Even in such cases, such images are shared for a variety of reasons other than revenge – to make money, for notoriety, for a ‘laugh’, for sexual gratification or for no real reason at all. The law and public policy should also be challenging the distribution of private, sexual images which are shared by hackers, or from stolen mobile phones, whether they know the victim or not. The term ‘revenge porn’ focuses too much on the [motivations of perpetrators](#) at the expense of the harms to victims.

Nor does ‘revenge porn’ cover the sharing of images created without consent and then shared, whether they are recordings of a sexual assault, or [upskirt images](#), or from voyeurs.

Image-based sexual abuse

Second, the term image-based sexual abuse is also preferable because it emphasises what these practices are – abusive. The non-consensual creation and/or distribution of private, sexual images is a serious harm often resulting in considerable mental and physical injuries. It is a form of harassment and often part of a pattern of coercive, domestic abuse. It is also a breach of the



fundamental rights to privacy, dignity and sexual autonomy, with women (and victims are mostly women) being forced off-line and blamed or targeted for expressing themselves sexually through imagery.

Thirdly, the language of image-based sexual abuse emphasises the links between the non-consensual use of private sexual images and other forms of sexual violence. It locates this form of abuse on the continuum of sexual violence, alongside other forms of abuse attacking women's sexual autonomy, identities and integrity. Labelling and understanding these practices as sexual offences is also vital to ensuring appropriate support and protections for victims, such as the need to reform the law to grant victims [anonymity](#) to encourage them to come forward to report practices to the police.

Not 'porn'

It's not just the 'revenge' aspect of 'revenge porn' that is problematic – it's also not 'porn'. The labelling of image-based sexual abuse as 'porn' implies a consent and legitimacy which is not warranted, as well as leading some policy-makers down the wrong path by thinking that images must pass a threshold of 'porn' or 'obscenity' before being unlawful; or that the perpetrator must be acting for purposes of sexual gratification to be criminalised. This is why image-based sexual abuse is preferable to other terms such as 'non-consensual pornography' or 'involuntary porn'.

Change the label, focus on the harms

It is time to relegate the term 'revenge porn' to the graveyard of other media-friendly monikers. Adopting the term image-based sexual abuse enables us to harness the power of law to challenge practices which are not only threatening women's sexual autonomy and fundamental rights, but are also a form of [cultural harm](#) affecting all of society.

The prevalence of image-based sexual abuse is normalising non-consensual sexual activity. The trivialising of the practice – its dismissal as 'just a bit of fun' – normalises a hateful and hostile discourse. In this way, image-based sexual abuse helps to sustain a culture – a set of attitudes – in which rape and other acts of sexual violence are less likely to be recognized as such, and are less likely to be investigated or prosecuted. Of course, there is no silver bullet here. But replacing the language of 'revenge porn' with the more accurate and inclusive image-based sexual abuse would be a small – yet important – step in challenging the cultural context conducive to high levels of sexual coercion and violence.

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