

Behind the Screen: How Platform-Specific Policy Affects Consumer Behaviour of Non-Consensual Pornography

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Abstract

Since 2010, the web has seen a proliferation of sites and forums dedicated to non-consensual pornography - sexually explicit photos posted on the web without the subject's consent. This subject makes headlines in the news and in the legal community, but is largely ignored in scholarship. This paper explores the user community that consumes and comments on non-consensual pornography in two different venues, one with curated submissions and the other with an open posting system, here represented by MyEX.com and Reddit. It undertakes a literature review of academic, legal, and popular literature related to the subject, however as little has been written on the consumers of this content the subsequent study seeks to fill this gap. Examining a sample of 20 posts from each platform, this study aims to discover how consumer behaviour is affected by both site-wide policy and site design. A content analysis of the sample was conducted, as well as a close reading of each platform's policy documents. The study revealed significant differences in user behaviour on each platform. Users of MyEX.com were more likely to provide identifying or personal information on photo-subjects, and used more violent language than Reddit users. Reddit users engaged in self-policing, leading to no instances of subject identification. This study concludes that site policy which is actively enforced, and site design which encourages inter-user communication can dramatically alter the way users engage with non-consensual pornographic content on the web.

1. Introduction

The recent emergence of large sites and forums dedicated to non-consensual pornography is easy to pass off as a purely negative phenomenon. These sites are often deemed the dark corners of the internet, assumed to be hateful places full of salacious material and malicious comments. These sexually explicit photos have incited tremendous controversy across the web. Many victims, the majority of whom are women, report being harassed both online and in person after their photos are posted on these sites. These photos often come with identifying information, such as links to social media profiles, phone numbers, and addresses. Victims often experience extreme depression and anxiety from the harassment incited by these photos, which can have extreme consequences, including suicide (Berger 2013). Because of the devastating consequences of these photos, revenge pornography posters and consumers have been marked as engaging in unethical online behaviour. However, while posting these

photos is easily marked as unethical regardless of ethical framework, consumption of this material cannot be so clearly delineated.

There are many different venues for consuming revenge porn, and each of these venues has its own rules for posting and commenting. In this study, we explore two platforms with contrasting design and rules for submission and interaction, in order to identify how consumer behaviour varies along with the variation of platform and policy.

2. Problem Statement:

The phenomenon of “revenge pornography” began appearing in mainstream articles from publications like *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and websites like *Jezebel*, and in academic articles from journals on feminism, philosophy, and law around 2011. The term “revenge porn” applies to sexual (usually nude) photographs and videos posted without the subject’s consent or knowledge on a public forum, often by an ex-partner, often for the purpose of enacting “revenge” for some perceived wrong (End Revenge Porn 2014; Stroud 2014). These images are often accompanied by captions that include identifying information about the subject, such as their place of work or home address, and derogatory statements about their sexual proclivities and apparent promiscuity, welcoming other commenters to join in on the humiliation both on and offline. Consumers of revenge porn participate to varying degrees – some enjoy the voyeuristic nature of simply looking at personal photos without the subject’s knowledge or consent; some participate by commenting and encouraging others to do the same; and some will go as far as to harass the subject directly, on social media or even in person. This phenomenon has been popularized by the creation of sites or forums specifically devoted to the sharing and consumption of these materials.

Despite revenge porn growing into an increasingly pressing issue within western society, it remains a poorly explored topic in academic writing. Due to its nascent status, few scholarly articles are written about revenge porn as a topic itself, let alone further nuances within the issue such as user communities. Articles often overlook the complexity of the production and consumption of non-consensual pornographic content, favouring discussion of possible solutions to end this phenomenon,. They also tend to focus on individuals, rather than the community in which these individuals have chosen to participate (Stroud 2014). This study focuses on community behaviour. We explore how consumers interact with the content and how they interact with other consumers and content-creators, and discuss how this behaviour is affected by different platforms.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Discussions of Online Communities and User Behaviour

Online communities began forming in the early days of the internet, with the academic study of online communities dating back to the 1990s. The majority of studies in the 1990s into the early 2000s focused on trust within communities. Studies in the late 1990s examined how online communities could reasonably believe all participants were being truthful in their discussions. Scholars hypothesized that truthfulness and trust was required for becoming

genuine communities. Ultimately, scholars argued that the online sense of community grew due to a level of foundational trust maintained amongst users as well as the technologies they were reliant upon (Blaze, Feigenbaum, and Lacy 1996; Bidault and Jarillo 1997; Castelfranchi and Tan 2002; Boyd 2003). This theory became prevalent with repeated examples of communities shunning users who were discovered to be untruthful, breaking the implicit trust of joining the community, strengthened this theory (Castelfranchi and Tan 2002). The majority of scholarly articles from the early 2000s onwards presume from the outset that online communities require the foundation of assumed truth between users.

With the rise of social media in the mid-2000s, academic discussions of online communities began to shift from studies of community dynamics towards examinations of individual user behaviour. Online communities began to intersect with offline communities as social media began to blur the line between each, and in turn online communities were more widely used thanks to social media. Society embraced a new notion of online communities consisting of online and offline friend groups, and academic studies turned towards examinations of user behaviour within these communities. Serious concerns about the negative impacts of blurring online and offline communities began to grow. From the late 2000s onwards, studies into cyberbullying and cyber aggression, particularly in adolescents, began to rise steadily. Researchers concluded that cyberbullying increases the stresses of bullying from something experienced in one place and transfers it to something experienced everywhere due to the prevalence of technology in modern life (Schneider et al. 2012). In turn, scholars proposed that the severity of cyberbullying was due to an increase in online verbal aggression, largely due to the lack of filter and anonymity allowing users to say exactly what they want without immediate response from the victim (Schneider et al. 2012).

Academic discussions of online communities intersect most notably with revenge porn in Caitlin PenzeyMoog's 2014 article "Scarlett Letters: Digital Subjugation of Revenge Pornography." PenzeyMoog offers suggestions on how communities are created around images of revenge porn through transforming the actors of revenge porn into producers, commodities and consumers. PenzeyMoog negotiates the transition of revenge porn images from private sexual representations to public sexual *commodities*, as part of a larger exploration of repressive capitalist practices that reduce women to commodities. In this relationship she considers the producers in the form of the individuals submitting the photos and the host sites, and the product in the form of the photos and their subjects, but says little about the motivations of the consumers. When discussing the value of the images, PenzeyMoog (2014) asserts that they transition from having private, sentimental value to public, cultural value when they are posted to a host site and enter a "community of like-minded members" who appreciate the product and can commiserate with the alleged wrong done to the poster, providing positive feedback (p. 15). It is this community then, that gives the image its value; the commodity has no value without being in demand with a ready group of consumers. Though she does not explore this aspect of the transaction in depth, the author does note that the "viewers themselves become part of the life of the image," but then labels them as "strangers," and "anonymous," removing any culpability or ability to explore their role further.

PenzeyMoog's article negotiates the creation of online communities surrounding revenge porn and also tentatively discusses user behaviour in these communities. She goes into further detail about the experience of the consumers, and notes that the poster asserts dominance over the woman in the photo. This dominance is then "shared" with the viewers when they participate in shaming her as well. PenzeyMoog (2014) further hypothesizes that "if one man 'owns' the images he can be seen to own the woman [and] sharing allows many men to also own the woman," even if it is only through the act of voyeuristic viewing without commenting (p. 17). Many viewers seem to refrain from commenting, and PenzeyMoog asserts that what they still enjoy, and what differentiates revenge porn from conventional porn, is its "realness" and "authenticity;" a real woman who does not consent to or profit from her objectification. Furthermore, identifying information is key to making a photo humiliating and shameful, not just sexual (PenzeyMoog 2014, p.12). PenzeyMoog admits that "production and *consumption* of goods cannot be studied as diametrically opposed" (p.13) but her article, like many on revenge porn, only fully explores the "product" of the transaction, the victims and subjects of the photos. In her language of economy she comes close to a deeper examination of the consumer, but stops short.

3.2 Revenge Porn in a Legal Context

The majority of scholarly writing about revenge porn is written by legal scholars. Most of the articles discussing revenge porn from a legal standpoint explore the prospect of criminalizing it within the present legal system and what laws ought to be modified or implemented to help prosecute distributors of non-consensual pornography. Currently, posting revenge porn has not been explicitly criminalized throughout the majority of North America. Legal action is pursued only when revenge pornography intersects with copyright violations, harassment, and child pornography (Mathen 2012; Calvert 2014; Citron and Franks 2014).

The content of most revenge porn sites is primarily unaltered images, which generally constitutes truthful speech. This makes it difficult for lawmakers to set precedent by prosecuting posters of these images unless there is accompanying harassment. (Calvert 2014). Non-consensual pornography can be prosecuted as a form of cyberbullying. Existing laws meant to protect victims of bullying, stalking, and voyeurism have been used to attempt to combat revenge porn in both Canada and the United States. These laws are not as effective as prosecutors hope; they become less effective when the behaviour transpires online (Mathen 2012). In 2014, European courts ruled that all search engines should grant the right to be forgotten to individuals who wanted to disassociate content with their names, allowing European victims of revenge porn to claim this right if they have been identified by name (Manjoo 2015). At times, individuals will claim copyright over their images, and use copyright law to insist that content be removed from certain sites (Vogt 2013). Copyright law and the right to be forgotten are increasingly used in defense of victims in the prosecution of non-consensual pornography sites and the users who post content to such sites (Vogt 2013; Arthur 2014). In cases like these, it is important to examine whether these rights supercede the user's right to freedom of expression. However, it is not always the original poster, but others who have encountered the photos online, who provide identifying information on the subject of these photo and incite

harassment (Calvert 2014). At times, legal action is filed against sites for hosting explicitly illegal content, such as photos of a minor, and these sites are shut down (Millner 2013). However, new sites devoted to this content are created in the place of defunct sites and consumers are never at a loss for places to find revenge porn (Drew 2014a). This confusing dynamic often leaves the court finding no one to blame, or placing the blame on the victim for consenting to appearing in an explicit photo, even though they have not consented to the photo appearing in a public forum (Calvert 2014). While some may argue that pursuing vengeance is not a new phenomenon, using the Internet as a means of doing so drastically changes the nature of this behaviour. Indeed, “the Internet provides a staggering means of amplification, extending the reach of content in unimaginable ways” (Citron and Franks 2014, p. 350). Though the legal community continues to look for ways to protect victims of non-consensual pornography, there is a persistent lack of understanding of the complex dynamics of online communities.

3.3 Revenge Porn in Popular Literature

Regardless of the legality of non-consensual pornography, it has garnered significant negative attention in popular media (Stroud 2014). Women continue to challenge popular revenge porn hosting sites in court, even though the law does not tend to favour their cases. Though these cases are often unsuccessful, they tend to attract attention from popular media. (Millner 2013). These women are often featured in popular news outlets, or in magazines, as cautionary tales. These articles brandish titles such as “I was a victim of revenge porn. I don’t want anyone else to face this,”(Chiarini 2013) and “He told me I was filth and I deserved it’ - What it’s really like to be a victim of revenge porn,” (Preskey 2015). Stories about victims are meant to inspire readers to join the fight against revenge porn, often ending with links to groups or petitions that advocate for laws that prohibit the posting of non-consensual content, whether it was obtained with or without consent of the subject. These popular publications tend to show clear bias towards the plaintiffs in the case, and the tone is accusatory at best. The women featured in the articles describe horror stories of their experiences following the posting of nude photos online by their former partners. For example, an article in 2013 which profiled multiple victims reads, “[One victim] said she hasn’t even been able to think about how the photos will affect her prospects for education and employment - right now she’s still worried about her safety.” (Millner 2013). The article carries on to describe how the victim feels that she cannot even leave her house without an escort, and how she fears the “creeps” that frequent these sites. Journalists express sympathy for the victims, and rage towards the site owners. Writes Millner, “If it doesn’t seem fair that these young women could have their lives and futures compromised simply because an old boyfriend or a stranger wanted to humiliate them, that’s because it’s not. It’s completely unfair.” (Millner 2013).

In response to the lack of regulation for non-consensual pornography, cyber rights activists have gathered on the web to advocate for legal action. These groups aim to spread information about the growing plague of revenge porn, but this can often lead to misconceptions. For instance, the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative created an infographic with the results of their “Effects of Revenge Porn” survey. This infographic reports staggering statistics;

for example, 49% of victims of revenge porn have been stalked or harassed by users who saw their content online. Upon closer examination, however, these results were obtained from a survey hosted on endrevengeporn.org, where anyone who visited the site was able to opt-in to the survey (End Revenge Porn 2014). This poses a problem, as presumably most visitors of endrevengeporn.org have a vested interest in ending revenge porn, feeding the media's cyclical sensationalization of the issue.

The media has also responded negatively to the arrest of Hunter Moore, the creator of IsAnyoneUp.com, one of the first forums for revenge pornography. The *New Yorker* called Hunter Moore, "The most hated man on the internet," (Greenhouse 2014), digging through his sordid past to assault his character.

Popular media discussions of revenge porn come across as black and white, with the focus remaining on victims and perpetrators. Little attention is paid to the consumers or communities surrounding revenge porn, although this phenomenon could not exist without this party. This study aims to bridge this substantial gap within the academic exploration of revenge porn and the user communities surrounding it.

4. Methodology

In this study concepts from the literature review were examined in the context of two different revenge porn host sites, selected for their contrasting approaches: MyEX.com, a curated archive, and [Reddit](http://Reddit.com), a community based forum site. As [Reddit](http://Reddit.com) is a large website with forums devoted to many different topics, this study focusses on two communities dedicated to non-consensual pornography.

The first major site devoted to revenge porn, founded in 2010, was a submission-based non-consensual pornographic called [IsAnyoneUp?](http://IsAnyoneUp.com) (Stroud 2014) Though it was taken down in 2012, archival access to [IsAnyoneUp?](http://IsAnyoneUp.com) was helpful in identifying the markers of a traditional revenge pornography site. MyEX.com has all of these markers. The content is presented on this site in a curated manner, with non-explicit photos usually being shown as thumbnails. After clicking on the photo, the post shows additional photographs of a more explicit nature. While both [Reddit](http://Reddit.com) and MyEX.com ostensibly cater to the same general community of consumers, their formats are fairly different. It is this contrast that we wished to study; is this contrast in site design reflected in consumer communities and their interactions?

Using a sample of 20 photos and their comments taken from MyEX.com, 10 photos and their comments taken from popular revenge porn subreddit "Photoplunder," and 10 photos and their comments taken from popular revenge porn subreddit "OnOff" we conducted a content analysis of comments, looking for trends among each site. All posts were uploaded to their respective platforms in November of 2015. We then analysed each site's individual policy documents (retrieved November 2015) and compared these policies to user behaviour on each site. The goal was not to interact with the users, but to study their organic interactions, by capturing their comments and recording details about the records or threads examined.

5. Results

5.1 Non-Consensual Porn on Reddit

Reddit is a site for social media, entertainment, and news that functions something like a bulletin board; users can submit content in the form of posts or links while other users vote these submissions up or down to organize the page. Different areas of interest and their posted content are divided into subreddits, which have historically included pages devoted to different pornographic images and videos, including revenge porn. When it comes to amateur or non-consensual porn, Reddit has a reputation for being fairly lenient with offensive content such as underage girls or violent acts, with Reddit staff noting in the past that it is a collaboratively curated site and refusing to police users. While there are many subreddits catering to the non-consensual or found-image porn genre, finding instances of the expected sexual harassment and slut shaming proved surprisingly fruitless.

On subreddits like Photoplunder, users post sexual photos of women found elsewhere on the internet, on sites such as Photobucket and Flickr. In many cases, posters obtain the photos by “fushing” sites like Photobucket, using the organizational structure of the site and its urls to access photos in private albums, looking specifically for nude and explicit photos. Though the subject of the photos likely has no idea they are on Reddit and has not provided consent, the posters do not tend to include any information indicating that they have a relationship, past or present, with the subject. There is a corresponding absence of slut shaming or revenge-seeking commentary. While the photos are obtained by undisclosed or questionable means, in this subreddit the approximately 48,000 readers are subject to some rules for posting, including no posting underage subjects; no posting a link to someone’s social media contact, or personal information including full names; at risk of being banned.

Another subreddit, OnOff, features “pictures of people (why lie its [sic] mainly women) with clothes and without clothes” and states only that there should be no underage postings (OnOff Subreddit 2015). Despite there being no stated rule against it, we found no comments featuring or linking to personal information, though some users requested personal information, simply asking “who is she” or “anyone know her?” with little or no response from the other users. At times a comment in response to these questions will appear as “Deleted,” indicating that perhaps more detailed information was provided and later removed by a moderator. In one instance a commenter was encouraged by others to prove that he knew one of the women on the site, and he did so by posting a screenshot of her facebook profile picture, but only after he had censored her name and other identifying information.

This absence of the material and behaviour associated with revenge porn on Reddit is coupled with a new behaviour observed in users: self-policing. When posters include too much information, whether in captions or by posting photos that reveal personal details, other commenters call them out. In one case on Photoplunder a comment revealed the subject’s occupation, and in another on OnOff the photo included a child in the background. Each time commenters noted that revealing such information is “not chill” (Photoplunder Subreddit 2015) and even “too much info to share online,” which could lead to “some nutjob ruining [the subject’s] life” (OnOff Subreddit 2015). In these cases posters removed the material accordingly and even apologized to their fellow users.

This new behaviour may be thanks in part to Reddit’s stand against revenge porn in March of 2015. Reddit introduced a new privacy policy concerning “involuntary pornography,”

stating that the site prohibits the posting of photos or videos in which subjects are naked or engaged in sexual activity, without their consent. Victims of such postings are instructed to contact Reddit as soon as possible and the content will be expeditiously removed (Reddit Privacy Policy 2015). Prior to this policy change Reddit executives were often criticized for responding flippantly to issues, noting that the site is a repository for content and shirking responsibility for regulation. When Reddit announced the new policy, articles in mainstream publications like Vice (Paul 2015) argued that while it was a step in the right direction, the policy still put the onus on the victims to contact Reddit, identifying themselves in the process, experiencing more shame and embarrassment. There was also concern over a lack of repercussions for the users posting images themselves or commenting to encourage revenge behaviour, calling for these users to be strictly banned at a site-wide rather than Subreddit-specific level. Now, over a year after the policy change, it seems as though it might be more effective than originally thought, as it is rare to encounter instances of photo subjects commenting and requesting content be removed. Instead, we found users casually policing one another for sharing too many details.

As a community, Reddit also has its own user behaviour policy, known as 'Reddiquette'. On the site it is billed as "an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves" (Reddit Wiki, 2015). Redditors post requirements and community values that are not seen on other online forums. This history of organically creating and enforcing policies seems to be more effective than other laws that come from outside legislators lacking an insider's view of how particular online communities operate. In her exploration of policing norms and expected behaviour in online communities, Kelly Bergstrom discusses online "trolls" as those who transgress these online community norms (Bergstrom 2011). By her definition, trolls on Reddit damage other user's trust, disrupt discussion, and disseminate bad advice (Bergstrom 2011), however these specific tendencies do not seem to apply to non-consensual porn posts, in which users are more concerned with the subject of the photo than the person posting it, or the other people viewing and commenting. Communication between users on the two subreddits observed did not tend to become heated or confrontational, and the most vehement disagreements were confined to rating a photo subject's attractiveness. At the same time, however, the self-policing behaviour does indicate that any behaviour deviating from tacit norms on subreddits will not be tolerated in most cases, regardless of intent. The deviants in the cases observed for this study were transgressing against the subjects of photos rather than fellow users, but were still held to a standard of expected behaviour within the community.

In addition to Reddit's site-wide policies, redditors self-policing one another, and moderators deleting inappropriate comments or posts, Reddit will occasionally step in to ban or quarantine a community. Two months after gathering the data for this paper, the Photoplunder subreddit was quarantined by Reddit. According to the site, "a community will be Quarantined on Reddit when we deem its content to be extremely offensive or upsetting to the average redditor. The purpose of quarantining a community is to prevent its content from being accidentally viewed by those who do not wish to do so" (Reddit Help n.d.). Redditors can still access the content by explicitly subscribing and providing a verified email address. This strikes a balance between Reddit's original emphasis on freedom within posting communities, but also

their more recent commitment to enforcing policies created in response to issues of concern for the wider internet community.

Reddit's user behaviour falls outside of the revenge porn consumption one might expect to encounter, and merits further examination. The instances of self policing raise questions about the effectiveness of their new privacy policy and the unique structure of a forum as opposed to a curated site.

5.2 *MyEX.com*

MyEX.com is a free, curated website that allows jilted lovers to submit explicit photos of former partners. MyEX.com promotes non-consensual pornography for the explicit purpose of achieving revenge, boasting the tagline "MyEX: Get Revenge." The site encourages submitters to include links to the social media profiles of the subjects with the images they submit. Additionally, the site charges an undisclosed fee to remove certain photos, frequently referred to in user comments as a fee around \$500. MyEX.com is often considered to be a viable alternative to the previously mentioned and now defunct *IsAnyoneUp* (Drew 2014a).

All submissions to MyEX.com are reviewed by a site administrator before being posted to the public site. Users who submit to MyEX.com are required to provide a first and last name for the subject featured in their photos, as well as a location - city and state/region or city and country, if the person featured lives outside of the United States - and the age and gender of the subject. Optional information includes a link to their Twitter or Facebook page, and a description box, labeled, "Give Casey some details or tell your story." (Submit Pics and Stories of Your Ex n.d.). MyEX.com provides complete anonymity for the poster to other users on the site, asking only for information about the ex. Though the privacy policy claims that MyEX collects tracking information about the posters and commenters for legal purposes and advertisement servers (MyEX Privacy Policy 2014), they claim that they do not keep these records and cannot provide them in the event of legal action (MyEX Law Enforcement n.d.). The user must also claim that they are at least 18 years old and the subject is at least 18 years old, as MyEX.com has a "zero tolerance" policy for child pornography (MyEX Terms of Use 2014). Commenters on MyEX.com must provide a name and email address, though they generally provide pseudonyms and MyEX does not reveal email addresses publically on the site. Users are unable to create accounts, so it is possible to use a different pseudonym each time, or to use the same pseudonym as another user on the site.

To remove content without paying a fee, individuals must verify that they are either a minor or law enforcement, or provide legal documentation that they own the copyright on the image. Though it does not explicitly say anywhere on the site policy that the subjects must pay a large fee to remove content, this is clearly the belief amongst users of the site, who often comment on posts referring to a takedown fee. The site's removal policy is very brief, and concludes by saying, "As a general rule if you don't want photos of you ending up on the internet be more careful who you send them too or better yet don't send them at all" (MyEX Removal Policy n.d.).

Subjects are generally female, although there is section of the site for photos of men. For the purposes of this study, we excluded photos of men, although the 20 most viewed posts were all females. We also noticed increased activity on the posts where the OP - original poster -

describes why he is seeking revenge. For example, the post that with the highest number of comments in our dataset was captioned, “When I started dating [name] she indicated that she was done with her previous boyfriend. I believed her for the seven months we dated, right up to the point where I caught her in bed with him.”¹ Similarly, posts had a higher number of comments when a user indicated that s/he was the subject of the photo or knew the subject.

We found that there seemed to be a small, dedicated user group who interacted with most posts. For example, one user who calls him or herself “Assholedetector” had commented on every post we have examined, asking the same question each time. Another user has tried to identify the address of most of the women on the site. The content of these comments is not unexpected; commenters display high levels of misogyny, violent sexual imagery, and racist, hateful language. Additionally, we found that most posters did not “dox” - provide identifiable information - the subjects beyond providing the required name, age, and location. Most doxing on the site is done by commenters, who actively seek out addresses, phone numbers, social media profiles, and any other available information about the subject. In fact, 18/20 posts we examined had at least one instance of attempted doxing, whether this be a link to a social media account, an address, or a phone number. Though MyEX.com claims to prohibit the posting of addresses and phone numbers, the administrator does not follow through on this policy. The site users have little interaction with each other, rather, they tend to direct their comments to the original poster. There is no “reply” action available for comments, so if a user is replying to another user’s comment, they will address the user by his or her pseudonym.

Often when there is a great deal of user interaction on posts it is when the users have believed the OP to be untruthful in their description of the subject. When a user believes the OP has either reposted photos available elsewhere, doctored the photos, or purposefully misled other users in the caption, it results in extreme hostility towards the OP and an abundance of comments on the post verbally attacking the OP.

As expected, most comments addressed the subject’s physical appearance, mostly using sexualized language or a rating system. However, 75% of the posts examined included violent language. This included sexual violence - such as threats of violent sexual assault or rape - and physical violence, such as users indicating the subject should be physically punished or killed. Users do not generally object to these comments, and if they do, other users assume they are the subject of the photo, tending to reply with comments such as, “Nice try, [name].”

In our sample, there were two notable posts in which commenters attempted to interact with one another. In the first, the subject in the picture was a minor at the time the photos were taken, as indicated by a comment from a user claiming to be the subject. Most users commenting included some indication about how they felt about the subject being underage. These varied in nature, including comments that came to the defense of the subject, and comments in defense of the OP, such as “Those tits don’t look 16 or 17 so its[sic] fair game girl! OP did a great job posting this hot blond texas lolita.” In the second, the caucasian subject was accused by the OP of being unfaithful with African-American men because he had “caught her not once but twice talking to black guys.” While some users attacked the OP for being a controlling partner, other comments applauded the OP, using racial slurs and expressing a

¹Quotations from MyEX.com posts have not been cited to protect the identity of the women featured.

belief in white-supremacy. For example, “If [name] mixes with n*ggers then she is no longer human. When a superior white person has sex with a subhuman n*gger they are engaging in bestiality and committing a hate crime against the human race...” There were no noted objections by users to these viewpoints or to the use of racial slurs. While these two posts were unique in content, they do indicate that there may be more posts of this nature on MyEX.com, and that the site administrators do not moderate the site for this type of content.

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Community Interaction:

In our first finding we observed that the level of community interaction on each site greatly affected the way consumers interacted with revenge porn. There was a distinct difference between Reddit, which has its own community guidelines for user behaviour, and MyEX, which had no such provisions. MyEX.com does not support inter-user communication, and the few instances in which a commenter attempted to engage another commenter on a post did not evoke response. Users pay little attention to other comments, instead directing their commentary to the original poster or the photo subject. On Reddit, there is an emphasis on community throughout the site, including subreddits geared towards pornography. There exists a culture of community accountability and responsibility, created by the behaviour guidelines of reddiquette, the ability to receive a notification of when a user replies to one’s comments, and the use of private messaging. This creates an online culture where people are able and encouraged to draw attention to behaviour that does not fit into the community guidelines that users subscribe to. For example, we found that while it was stated on the MyEX website that posting someone’s personal or identifying information was prohibited, the majority of the comment threads we looked at included examples of users posting prohibited information.

Reddit’s existing community accountability ostensibly makes it easier for users to maintain compliance with new privacy terms of use. Community members exist within a user-based culture that values following agreed upon guidelines that can more easily assimilate new rules and uphold them accordingly. By continuing to use Reddit after the privacy policy has been updated, there is an inherent assumption that users are agreeing to adhere to these standards, whereas an average MyEX user is not actively engaged in conversation with other MyEX users.

6.2 Relationships between poster and subject:

In much of the popular, scholarly, and legal literature on revenge porn, writers discuss the relationship between the person posting the photos and the subject given that they often share a sexual or romantic past. Indeed, it is this familiarity that becomes the crux of the “revenge” act; one partner has wronged the other, who now seeks personal revenge in the form of humiliation and reputational damage. Writers like PenzeyMoog (2014) attempt to explore what urges revenge pornographers to take a personal, intimate relationship and its dissolution and turn it into a somewhat public spectacle, shared with strangers. As previously noted, she ultimately concludes that there is not only the satisfaction of public humiliation, but a sense of validation experienced by the poster when others share in his disgust and anger at the subject

of the photos, confirming his belief that she is a bad, promiscuous woman who deserves to be ridiculed and punished (p.16) . While this seems like a logical explanation, and may in fact be the type of validation and vengeance some posters seek, the consumer community did not always respond accordingly in our observations. Instead, the consumer response seemed to be influenced by the poster's initial comments, with little negativity directed towards the anonymous photo subjects on Reddit, and negativity directed toward both poster and photo subject on MyEX. Contrary to PenzeyMoog's assertions, there was little evidence of a sense of community formed around the poster on MyEX's explicit revenge porn, and also more positive community interaction between Reddit users on pornographic images that were non-consensual but also non-vengeful.

Reddit's new privacy policy makes conventional revenge porn increasingly difficult to track down, and the non-consensual images posted on the subreddits included in this survey did not seem to feature subjects who had a personal relationship with the poster. It is, of course, difficult to determine whether posters are simply choosing not to share the personal connections they may have with photo subjects, or whether they are posting photos of strangers. As Bergstrom points out in her study on trolls in online communities, members do not always tell the truth about their identities off of the web (Bergstrom 2011), and as such observers must take online behaviour at face value. In this case, several subreddits are now displaying photos that are explicitly "found," through hacking online photo hosting sites, and as such the person posting the photo usually states that they have no personal connection to the subject whatsoever. In other cases, photos are posted with little description or background information from the Reddit user, let alone a caption revealing the disintegration of a relationship or calling for acts of harassment and humiliation. Commenters in return do not post the excessively derogatory and offensive comments one would expect when looking for revenge porn, and discussion is limited to the subject's appearance and the users' reactions, rather than plotting revenge and posting personal information.

On MyEX.com poster and commenter behaviour was more akin to conventional revenge porn accounts. It is however, somewhat inaccurate to use the word "community" in describing user comments as they are not usually supporting or interacting with one another, as previously noted. While many posters do provide photo captions with salacious details of failed relationships and ex-lover's infidelities, calling for retribution in the form of harassment and slut shaming, they rarely receive the commiseration and positive feedback that PenzeyMoog (2014) describes (p.15). While commenters are eager to join in on degrading the photo subject, the poster was in more than one case also met with ridicule and shame by association, and had their story turned against them. A poster might be variously made fun of by other commenters for breaking up with a girl who was apparently too attractive for him in the first place, regardless of her cheating, or for being oblivious that a girl who would "take pictures like these" would in turn be promiscuous. In PenzeyMoog's description, the poster seeks validation and acceptance from a like-minded community (p. 17), though this is conspicuously absent from the posts surveyed on MyEX.com, and the incentive to post is less clear. It could be that the slut-shaming that does occur satisfies them, even at the expense of their own ego. When it comes to the consumers on the site, PenzeyMoog's theory is partially correct; she sees the poster asserting dominance over the woman in the photo, and the consumers sharing in this feeling in viewing

and commenting upon the photo. This is certainly true of MyEX.com, but their aggression towards the poster could perhaps be seen as an extension of said show of dominance, dominating the man too, making him seem weak, pathetic, or, in most cases, deserving of cuckoldry. Where this theory falls short is the existence of a *community* to validate and accept wronged men; commenter behaviour indicates that MyEX.com subscribes to an every-man-for-himself mentality.

6.3 Community Values:

The values exhibited by a particular community were linked to the community makeup, not the subject matter. While both the subreddits we examined and MyEX.com were devoted to the circulation of non-consensual pornography, the ethical guidelines the communities adhered to varied greatly. These ethical guidelines appeared to mimic the design of the community, rather than the subject matter of the community. As previously discussed, Reddit is a user-based community, which encourages user interaction and values what users have to offer the community. MyEX.com, however, is content-based, with little to no user interaction other than interaction with the subject matter itself. These extreme opposites in user interaction resulted in two very different community ethical guidelines observed within the communities.

The community observed on MyEX.com was vastly different than the one observed on Reddit. While Reddit exhibited signs of user self-policing and adaptability to changing ethical guidelines, MyEX.com users exhibited none of this. This is largely due to the makeup of MyEX.com; it has an entirely top-down design, with the moderators, not users, controlling the community. As users are unable to directly interact with one another, it is not the users' own values, but the moderators' values that are imposed onto the site. However, rather than a moral code, moderators on MyEX.com appear to adhere to a strict legal, convenience, and profit-oriented outlook on ethical guidelines. If the images can be legally hosted on MyEX.com, then they remain on MyEX.com and moderators, and by extension users, exhibit little concern for whether it is morally or ethically right to have them there.

These polarised community ethical guidelines are clearly demonstrated by the image removal policies on both Reddit and MyEX.com. Further demonstrated is the second moral dimension of pragmatism Stroud (2014) discusses in his paper, and where the right lies in these different situations. In Reddit's non-consensual pornography removal policy, Reddit authorities demonstrate that it is the right of the subject, not the consumer, that is of higher value to the community. The complex removal policy and apathy towards the subjects demonstrated through MyEX.com illustrates how MyEX.com places more value on the right of the consumer. The weighing of which actor has the greater right in the situation reflects the ethical guidelines in both communities.

The strong sense of ethical guidelines observed on Reddit illustrate a fluid community, open to discussion and change. The user-driven nature of the community on Reddit presents opportunities to adapt the community's ethical guidelines to reflect users' changing morals surrounding specific behaviours. The community adapts to what the users feel comfortable with, with users self-policing to ensure that others adhere to community standards and guidelines. Reddit's take down policy for non-consensual pornography reflects the user community of consumption without intent to harm. This policy also reflects how the subject's right to privacy

outweighs the user's right to access the content. Reddit is making it clear to users that the subject has the right to privacy by allowing users to request their images be taken down, no questions asked. The right to be forgotten on the subject's part outweighs the right for freedom of expression and freedom of consumption on the part of the consumer. By placing greater weight on the right of the subject than the right of the consumer, Reddit is essentially creating a space where non-consensual pornography can be consumed somewhat ethically.

The take-down policy on MyEX.com demonstrates the rights of the consumers being upheld above all else, except, perhaps, for the rights of the site moderators. At first glance the policy appears thorough and extensive; upon closer examination, it is misleading and inconsistent. Whereas Reddit has one email for users to contact to have their images removed, MyEX.com has four different locations for a user to go to attempt to have their images removed. These sections include Law Enforcement, Minor Removal, DCMA complaints, and General Removals. MyEX.com makes it explicitly clear that if a user contacts them through the wrong avenue, the moderators will ignore the request. With this policy, site administrators have made it clear to all users that the right of the subject, or persons acting on behalf of the subject, has limited value or power. When the interests of a subject and the user community are at odds, it is the wants of the consumer and poster that are respected before the right of the subject. This is illustrated by the fact that MyEX will only remove a subject's name from any legally hosted photo, and not the entire post. If the right of the moderator is being threatened, i.e. if the image is being hosted illegally and thus legal actions can be moved against the moderator, then and only then will images be taken down. If a general request for take down is issued, then the subject will be requested to provide a convenience fee to have that image taken down, as it is inconveniencing the moderator.

Possibly the most glaring example of the right of the moderator being upheld above all else is MyEX's conflicting policies on the collection of IP addresses. The MyEX privacy policy states that a visitor's IP address will be collected to be sold to advertisers and handed over to law enforcement if necessary (MyEx Privacy Policy, 2015), while on their law enforcement take down page they state that they do not keep records of IP addresses (MyEX Law Enforcement, 2015). Either MyEX.com is deliberately misleading users about their privacy, or MyEX.com is evading law enforcement.

The ethical guidelines of a community vary greatly depending on the structure of that community, which ultimately illuminates which actor has the greater right in these situations. Reddit has a more democratic, user-based community, and the greater right is then placed on the subjects of these images. The subject's right to privacy is respected, and users' lack of harmful intent thus allows Reddit users to consume non-consensual pornography ethically. MyEX.com illustrates almost the complete opposite of Reddit; instead of a user-based, democratic community, MyEX.com exhibits more of a monarchy, moderator-determined community. This community then places all of the right within the situation into the hands of the moderators, and due to aligning values also users, with little-to-no right granted to the subjects of these photos. Clearly, the way a platform is designed and run greatly impacts how the ethical guidelines will be created, abided by, and adapted by the user community.

7. Recommendations and Limitations

This study represents only a narrow sample of the available platforms for consuming revenge pornography on the web. There are countless other sites dedicated to this type of material, and these sites are perpetually being shut down and reopened. Though MyEX.com was fully functional in November 2015 when we gathered our data, it has been shut down in the past and may very well be shut down again in the future (Drew 2014b). It is by no means the only platform that exists, or will exist, and it is in no way representative of all other non-forum-based platforms. In the same vein, Reddit is not the only forum-based platform for consuming this content. 4Chan is a notable online forum venue that boasts this type of content, and its users may have their own identity and self-imposed guidelines that vary dramatically from Redditors and Reddiquette. To truly study consumption of revenge pornography, an exploration of more venues would be necessary.

Furthermore, our study represents a deep dive into a shallow sample of each of these platforms. Though we looked at 20 records from each site, new content is generated daily. Our sample of Reddit threads is also shallow. We did succeed in identifying numerous threads that hosted non-consensual pornographic content. However, just because we did not encounter any traditional “revenge” content does not mean that there are no subreddits with this content. As of February 2015, there were over 160 million active users on reddit, and over 9,000 active subreddits (Reisinger 2015). It is possible that a more thorough examination of Reddit could uncover a subreddit where users were engaging with revenge pornography in a way similar to the users of MyEX.com or the behaviour predicted by PenzeyMoog.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that people may represent themselves or their stories online in a way that is exaggerated or falsified. Therefore, the behaviour of users in an online community is not necessarily indicative of their true selves outside of the online community. There is no way to guarantee that the identifying information or stories posted on MyEX.com are in any way true; in fact, often on MyEX.com commentors indicate that addresses or names associated with a picture is not accurate. For example, writes one commenter using the name “jim,” “...the phone number doesn’t make sense to me. my uncle that lives in wake county, nc has a 919 area code. in fact, i know a few people from durham, too, that have 919 are[sic] code.” Similarly on Reddit, though the original posters of these photos may assert that they have no personal relationship with the subject of the photos, it is possible that they are not revealing this relationship. In fact, Redditors could be omitting this information in the face of Reddit’s policy on involuntary pornography. Revealing information that photos were posted without the consent of the subject may put the poster at risk of being removed or suspended from Reddit (Reddit Content Policy). Because there is no way to guarantee that any information posted on these sites is true, we can only evaluate how consumers respond to the assumption that the information presented is true, and the possibility that it has been falsified.

Further analysis of different platforms will help to create a body of scholarly literature exploring how users interact with non-consensual pornographic content. A move away from legal research on criminalizing this behaviour, and towards different methods for monitoring revenge pornography may lead to a deeper understanding of this behaviour. As scholars begin to consider revenge pornography as the multifaceted and complex issue that it is, policy-makers will be able to respond. The study of more content and platforms may pave the road for policy geared to encourage less harmful consumption and distribution of this material.

8. Conclusion

This study lays the groundwork for further research into the complex phenomenon that is non-consensual pornography. The information uncovered in this study indicates that consumers of this content vary dramatically in their behaviour, and this behaviour is dictated by the communities and their collective values. These online communities mimic traditional societies, and, as Michael Quinn writes, “Every society has rules of conduct describing what people ought and ought not to do in various situations.” (55). We examined two such online-societies, and found that these communities held dramatically different values. MyEX.com’s implied rules of conduct display a community that values dominance, aggression, and revenge, whereas Reddit has rules created by an administrator, and a community which values these rules and the right to participate. This community also seems to abide by a set of self-imposed rules and boundaries that are not made explicit in Reddit’s policies. Legal and popular literature do not explore the variety of motives and behaviour in both posting and interacting with this content, instead assuming that all behaviour is the same. However, as demonstrated by Reddit users, it is possible to interact with this content in a way that does not intentionally pose further harm to the subject.

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