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Disclosure Decisions and Help-Seeking Experiences Amongst Victim-Survivors of Non-Consensual Intimate Image Distribution

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ABSTRACT

The non-consensual dissemination of intimate images (NCII) is a form of technology-facilitated, image-based sexual abuse. Despite causing significant harm, research indicates a reluctance to seek support. Thus, this study aimed to develop practitioner recommendations for improving support accessibility by exploring NCII victim-survivors' disclosure decisions and experiences of accessing support. Thematic Analysis of 31 UK adult victim-survivor interviews revealed informal support was favored, although some did not disclose to anyone. Disclosure responses ranged from supportive to judgmental. Barriers to help-seeking included stigma and perceiving formal support services as inaccessible. Recommendations for improving formal support accessibility such as service visibility, education and inclusive practices are discussed.

Introduction

The non-consensual distribution of intimate images (NCII), colloquially known as "revenge porn," is a form of technology-facilitated, image-based sexual abuse (Henry et al., 2020). NCII involves disseminating sexual or nude images (photos and/or videos) of someone without their consent. The images may have originally been shared consensually, coercively obtained or created without the individual knowledge (e.g., secretly filmed) (Powell et al., 2022). Non-consensual dissemination methods include sharing the images privately with individuals or closed groups (e.g., via private messaging) or posting them online such as social media or pornography websites (Clancy et al., 2020; Hearn & Hall, 2019; Henry & Flynn, 2019; Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020). There are various motives for perpetrating NCII beyond revenge, such as sexual boasting, social cohesion and sexual gratification (Clancy et al., 2020; Henry & Flynn, 2019). Thus, the term "revenge porn" has been criticized for failing to capture the diverse motives, insinuating victim responsibility and failing to hold perpetrators accountable (Maddocks, 2018). As such, alternative terms such as image-based sexual abuse have been developed to describe a group of behaviors including the non-consensual *creation* and/or *distribution* of intimate images and the *threat* to share these images (McGlynn et al., 2017). As this paper specifically explores one of these behaviors, the non-consensual *dissemination* of sexual/nude images, NCII will be used as a more focused term.

The UK introduced criminal legislation under The Criminal Justice and Courts Act (2015) to tackle NCII which is a growing international problem (Henry et al., 2020). However, an exact prevalence rate is hard to determine due to differing definitions, low reporting rates and some individuals being unaware of their victimization. Although expected to be an underestimation (Rackley et al., 2021), 8% of 3,044 US adults (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020) and 20.9% of a community sample of over 6,100 participants (aged 16–64 years) from Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Powell et al., 2022) reported having nude/sexual images shared without their consent. Younger adults, non-heterosexual individuals, those with a disability and those who engage in online dating and nude self-image taking are more likely to experience it (Powell et al., 2022).

A feminist perspective has dominated the research surrounding NCII, with academics arguing that NCII is a form of gender-based violence which disproportionately affects women (Bates, 2017; Henry & Flynn, 2020; McGlynn et al., 2021). The argument centers around claims that women are more likely to be victimized and experience more harm (Henry & Powell, 2016). However, the research is inconsistent: although some studies indicate that women are more likely to experience NCII than men (Dardis & Richards, 2022; Karasavva & Forth, 2022; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020), others have found no statistically significant gender differences in victimization (Clancy et al., 2020; Douglass et al., 2020; Gassó et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, the few studies exploring gender differences of harm, found no statistically significant differences in the psychological distress experienced between male and female victim-survivors (Champion et al., 2022; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020), with differences only being observed for somatic symptoms (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). These inconsistent findings and the tendency to use female-only samples when exploring the harm of victimization (Bates, 2017; Huber, 2023) make gender-comparative claims hard to substantiate based on the existing research. Subsequently, academics such as Champion et al. (2022), have criticized the employment of gendered theories focusing on gender differences when exploring NCII, which they argued can exaggerate differences and contribute to potentially problematic and harmful claims.

Whilst there is insufficient evidence supporting gender differences, the potential for NCII to cause significant harm is well-documented. Although the harm caused can vary, victim-survivors report serious, all-encompassing, long-lasting impacts, which can affect all aspects of their lives (McGlynn et al., 2021). This can include new or enhanced physical ill-health due to stress or physical assault from their contact information being shared (Huber, 2023; Magaldi et al., 2020; Rackley et al., 2021). It can also result in psycho-social harm, such as worsened psychological well-being, depression, stress, anxiety, PTSD symptoms, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Bates, 2017; Champion et al., 2022; Kamal & Newman, 2016; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; Short et al., 2017); and social harm such as isolation, loss of trust in others, exclusion and reputational damage (Huber, 2023; McGlynn et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2022). Victim-survivors can also face significant practical, professional and/or financial consequences, e.g., loss of employment, changing names, contact information or moving house (Huber, 2023; Magaldi et al., 2020; Short et al., 2017). This level of ongoing, continuous and all-encompassing harm requires moving beyond a medicalized understanding of victim-survivors' harm toward a more holistic approach (McGlynn et al., 2021); analysis of 75 interviews with victim-survivors of any form of image-based sexual abuse found it can

cause a profound "social rupture" that can have an overwhelming and devastating effect on victim-survivors' entire lives, sense of self and identity (McGlynn et al., 2021). Comparatively, NCII victim-survivors report greater distress than those who have experienced other forms of technology-facilitated sexual abuse, such as online sexual harassment and online gender/sexuality-based harassment (Champion et al., 2022). Academics have argued the significant impact NCII can have on victim-survivors makes it comparable to sexual abuse and domestic violence (Bates, 2017; McGlynn et al., 2017; Rackley et al., 2021).

However, the significant harm experienced is not always recognized by others, as evidenced by the presence of victim-blaming identified in the general public (Bothamley & Tully, 2017; Flynn et al., 2022; Gavin & Scott, 2019; Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020), the media (Gannon, 2022) and police (Henry et al., 2018; McGlynn et al., 2021; Rackley et al., 2021). Thus, as NCII can be a traumatic and stigmatizing experience (Adler & Chenoa Cooper, 2022; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021) which can cause significant harm, it is crucial to understand how to best support victim-survivors and explore their experiences of disclosing their victimization.

Help-seeking literature

The help-seeking literature is vast with researchers exploring populations where individuals may not access support. For example, intimate partner violence and sexual assault/rape are significantly underreported, with few victim-survivors seeking support (Ameral et al., 2020; Littleton, 2010; Satyen et al., 2019). Several barriers to help-seeking have been identified for victim-survivors of these offenses, including stigma, fear of repercussions, perceiving the situation to not be severe enough and difficulty recognizing abusive behavior (Ameral et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2022; Zinzow et al., 2021). Although the help-seeking literature on sexual violence is extensive, it focuses on physical forms of abuse. To date, there is limited research exploring the help-seeking decisions and experiences of victim-survivors of NCII specifically. As NCII can significantly impact those who experience it (Bates, 2017; Huber, 2023; McGlynn et al., 2021), it is important for victim-survivors to have access to support. Given NCII is argued to be on a continuum with other forms of sexual violence (McGlynn et al., 2017), victim-survivors may face similar challenges when seeking support as identified in the existing help-seeking literature for domestic violence and sexual abuse. However, as a technology-facilitated form of sexual violence, NCII may result in different challenges and experiences which may not be reflected in the existing help-seeking literature. Unlike other forms of sexual violence, which often occur privately, the distributive and often online nature of NCII can make their victimization public. This could present unique differences in victim-survivors' experiences of accessing support. For example, the public nature may remove the option for non-disclosure, whilst the online nature can result in an anonymous perpetrator or being victimized by multiple individuals with a potential for their abuse to be reshared or commented on by hundreds or thousands of people. Furthermore, although NCII is not a "new" phenomenon, it is becoming a growing problem (Henry et al., 2020), highlighting the need to understand help-seeking in this area. Therefore, this paper contributes to the help-seeking and NCII literature by exploring the help-seeking decisions and experiences of victim-survivors of NCII specifically.

Help-seeking behaviors and decisions amongst NCII victim-survivors

The limited and often descriptive research which has explored help-seeking amongst NCII victim-survivors suggests victim-survivors may be reluctant to access support despite the harm it causes. In surveys of 66 UK adult NCII victim-survivors (Short et al., 2017) and 126 Australian victim-survivors aged 15-29 (Douglass et al., 2020), few accessed formal support or reported their experience to the police (0–10%), with most (61–63%) favoring disclosing to friends. Some victim-survivors (between 31–73%) did not disclose their experience to anyone (Douglass et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020), suggesting a reluctance to seek support similar to those who experience other forms of sexual violence (Zinzow et al., 2021), highlighting the need to further investigate help-seeking decisions.

As the research exploring help-seeking amongst NCII victim-survivors has often done so as part of broader survey research aims (Douglass et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; Short et al., 2017), there has often been minimal research exploring why victim-survivors may be reluctant to seek help. Initial research of the barriers to support, identified embarrassment and shame as the most common barriers to disclosing NCII (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; Short et al., 2017), with Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2020) suggesting women were more likely to report embarrassment and men were more likely to report "it didn't bother me," although no statistical significance tests were conducted. However, Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2020) assessed barriers to help-seeking by asking participants who did not tell anyone about their experience to select from five pre-determined categories ("I was embarrassed or ashamed," "I was afraid," "I didn't have time," "it didn't bother me" or "other"). Thus, although research has started to explore barriers to disclosure, this has been minimal, often utilizing a deductive approach, highlighting the need for further research which adopts a data driven and victim-informed approach.

Facilitators for disclosing NCII have largely been unexplored. Rubinsky et al. (2023) is one study which specifically investigated facilitators for telling new/current partners about NCII experiences. They identified the following facilitators: seeking support, concerns their partner would find out/see the images, partner concerns about them, allowing their partner to understand their behavior or traits (e.g., dislike for sexual images) or because it was conversationally relevant. Although the study provides useful insights into facilitators to disclosing NCII experiences to new partners, facilitators may differ from those relating to seeking support from police or victim support services, highlighting the need to explore all forms of support. Therefore, to build on the limited existing research, this study used an in-depth, explorative qualitative approach to explore barriers and facilitators to disclosure and accessing "formal" support (help-seeking made in a professional capacity e.g., police, victim-support services, organizations/charities, helplines, therapists/psychologists, lawyers etc.) as well as "informal" support (help-seeking from one's social network e.g., friends, family or online).

Furthermore, this paper explored victim-survivors' experiences of disclosure and help-seeking as the stigmatizing nature of NCII could influence help-seeking as found in other stigmatized groups (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Zinzow et al., 2021). Victim-blaming attitudes (Flynn et al., 2022; Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020) could result in inconsistent support for NCII victim-survivors (Rackley et al., 2021) and negative reactions after disclosure, which could exacerbate the harm they face (McGlynn et al., 2021). As experiencing more negative social reactions to disclosing sexual assault and intimate partner violence is

associated with worsened psychological factors such as self-blame, and less posttraumatic growth (Ullman, 2023), it is important to also understand help-seeking experiences as well as the decisions behind disclosures. By exploring help-seeking decisions and experiences, the research aims to develop practitioner-focused recommendations for support services, to complement the governmental-level policy recommendations developed (e.g., Rackley et al., 2021). To develop these recommendations and to explore victim-survivors' experiences of help-seeking, the study aimed to investigate two research questions:

(1) What facilitates and inhibits victim-survivors' disclosure decisions and access to support?
(2) What are victim-survivors' experiences of receiving formal and informal support?

Method

Design

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the help-seeking decisions and experiences of victim-survivors of NCII. The qualitative participant-centered approach allowed the in-depth exploration of complexities of harm and disclosure decisions of NCII from the participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014) enabling them to voice their experiences and reclaim their stories which can often be lost due to the nature of NCII (Sparks, 2022).

Participants

Participants were UK residents who experienced having their nude/sexual images shared non-consensually when they were 18 or over and since 2015. The location and timeframe restrictions helped contextually define the possible support victim-survivors could access in terms of the legal framework and existing formal support which vary significantly internationally and were only introduced in 2015 in the UK. Additionally, as there is currently no international support for IBSA, only recruiting participants from the UK was also an ethical decision to ensure the researchers could adequately signpost all victim-survivors to national/local support services after the interview if they felt they needed additional support. The restricted age limit (18+ years old) was implemented to prevent disclosures of offenses against children, as legally nude/sexual images of those under 18 would be categorized as indecent images of children (child pornography), and thus a different criminal offense compared to adult victim-survivors.

Online and offline posters/advertisements were used to recruit participants, which asked, *"Have you had sexual or nude images of you shared without your consent?"* and introduced the study aim to participants as understanding decisions to disclose their experience and/or access support. Anyone interested in participating in the research was asked to e-mail the first author. The posters did not mention "revenge porn," "victim" or "survivors" to be more inclusive of the various contexts surrounding NCII and how individuals appraised their experience. A broad recruitment strategy was adopted to access this hard-to-reach population (Huber, 2023) and to recruit participants with varied help-seeking experiences. For example, to reach participants who may not have told anyone, or had only told friends/family, advertisements were made on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit),

Table 1. Participant sample demographics and contextual information.

Demographic & contextual information	Categories	N	(%)
Participant age	Range: 19–52* Mean: 25.5* SD: 6.6	31 (total)	
	*one participant's age not included		
Participant gender	Female	21	67.4
	Male	8	25.8
	Non-binary	2	6.5
Participant sexuality	Heterosexual	18	58.1
	Homosexual	1	3.2
	Bisexual/pansexual	11	35.5
	Other	1	3.2
Perpetrator relationship	Current or ex-partner/someone dated casually	24	77.4
	Friend/Family member	4	12.9
	Acquaintance/stranger	1	3.2
	Unknown	2	6.5
Perpetrator gender	Male	26	83.9
	Female	3	9.7
	Unknown	2	6.5

through UK universities and research websites (e.g., CallForParticipants). Several charities and organizations for sexual abuse, domestic violence and mental health were also contacted to ask for their support circulating recruitment materials within their networks, on their websites or their social media pages. These organizations were approached as they may be supporting individuals who have experienced NCII due to the potential for it to occur alongside other forms of abuse. Participants were offered a £10 voucher as a thank-you for participating.

Overall, 31 victim-survivors participated (Table 1). Despite all having had their nude/sexual images shared non-consensually, the circumstances and motives differed (e.g., from intending to harm or control to sexually bragging or as a joke). Perpetrators were often male, current or ex-partners (including long-term and casual relationships). Some of the images were originally taken consensually, whilst others were coerced or were taken without consent (e.g., secretly filmed). For some participants, NCII was experienced alongside other forms of abuse (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, and stalking). Even when only NCII was experienced, this could lead to additional harassment from acquaintances and strangers.

As NCII can be a traumatic experience (Bates, 2017), which can co-occur with other forms of abuse (McGlynn et al., 2021) the British Psychological Society's (2021) ethical guidelines were implemented throughout with careful consideration for safeguarding participants. Informed consent was obtained, and sources of support were provided. The research was approved by Nottingham Trent University's School of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online between 07.2021–01.2023 and ranged between 30–90 minutes long. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview topic guide was designed to follow a natural conversation, logically progressing from their experience of NCII to their disclosure decisions and experiences ending with their general awareness and perceptions of formal support (see Table 2 for example questions from the interview schedule). Open-ended questions were used where possible so participants could share as much or as little as they were comfortable with.

Table 2. Interview topic guide.

Interview topic guide	Example questions
Information about the participant	Please can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
Information about their experience of NCII	Please can you tell me a little bit about what happened?
	How did you feel when you found out?
Information about their decision to disclose	Did you tell anyone about what happened? (If so, who?)
	(If not told anyone) why did you decide not to tell anyone?
	(If told others) why did you decide to tell this person/service specifically?
	(If told others) please could you talk me through your experience of telling this person/service?
Information about knowledge of NCII, support and legislation	Did you have any education about sharing sexual images?
	Can you tell me a little bit about what you know about the current law for the non-consensual sharing of sexual images in the UK?
	What do you think about the current law?
	At the time of your experience, were you aware of any formal support service?
	What support do you think would be helpful to people who experience having their nude/sexual images shared?
Information about societal perceptions	What do you think society's attitudes are around sending sexual images consensually or non-consensually?

Data was analyzed through inductive and deductive Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) from a critical realist perspective, which recognizes that reality can be measured but that people's perspectives of reality are subjective (Lawani, 2021) and are situated in social-cultural constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As the purpose of this paper is to provide practitioner recommendations, a more summative account of the themes has been produced. Where theoretically relevant, the sexual scripts theory has been applied to understand participants' experiences. Sexual scripts are cognitive schemas which act as culturally informed guidelines that influence our understanding of normative sexual behavior which direct our thoughts and behaviors (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). One's understanding of appropriate behavior can differ depending on the social groups they belong to; most noticeably, the theory argues that sexual scripts are inherently gendered, with men and women adopting opposing roles (Sanchez et al., 2012; Wiederman, 2005). For example, men being more sexually assertive whilst women are expected to show more restraint. Deviations from sexual scripts can result in backlash and social consequences (Sanchez et al., 2012). How these sexual scripts inform participants' understanding of NCII and their help-seeking decisions will thus be discussed.

The analysis was conducted by the first author and followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step process to produce key themes (meaningful patterns across participants' experiences) relevant to the research questions. In Step 1 the first author familiarized themselves with the data by listening to the audio and reading the transcripts. Inductive codes were generated for each transcript using NVivo software so the entire data was coded (step 2). Codes related to the research question (e.g., disclosure decisions and perceptions and experiences of support) were identified and organized to develop initial themes (step 3). A theme was identified as a key pattern across participants' experiences which addressed the research question. The research team then reviewed and discussed the themes to ensure they were coherent, distinguishable and captured the data (step 4). Themes were then refined and labeled, with a smaller selection of appropriate extracts identified to illustrate the presence of each theme (step 5). Finally, step 6 involved writing a logical and coherent narrative

of each theme with relevantly presented quotes. The themes presented in this paper are a subset of the themes identified in the research and have been chosen for their relevance to inform practitioner recommendations.

Pseudonyms are used with each verbatim extract. Any text omitted is indicated by an ellipsis (...).

Results

Nearly all participants described their initial experience of NCII as feeling "exposed," "violating" and/or "embarrassing." The impact varied; some participants described NCII as an acutely stressful, but short-lived and manageable experience, whilst others described severe, long-lasting harm (e.g., lasted years or ongoing harm which impacted multiple aspects of their lives). It is possible that the harm experienced depended on dissemination (e.g., who had seen them, method of sharing) and how quickly the victim-survivors can reinstate control (get images removed).

Participants' disclosure decisions varied; 6 participants (19%) told no one about their experience, whilst most accessed forms of informal support with 23 (74%) telling friends and family, and 3 (10%) accessing informal support from other sources such as coworkers and strangers online. Fewer participants accessed formal support; 7 (23%) had police contact, 4 (13%) accessed support organizations/charities and 5 (16%) told other forms of formal support such as a therapist/psychologist or college counselor. Those who accessed a form of formal support (e.g., police, therapist, organization/charity) often had also disclosed to friends and/or family. Responses to participants' disclosures of NCII were often positive or mixed, with few having solely negative experiences. Three main themes related to barriers and facilitators to disclosure were identified (Table 3).

Theme 1: the role of stigma and shame

The first theme centered around the stigma associated with NCII. Subtheme 1.1 focuses on how anticipating stigma posed as a barrier to disclosure whilst subtheme 1.2 outlines examples of enacted stigma by exploring the negative reactions participants had when disclosing their NCII experiences. Finally, subtheme 1.3 discusses how the absence of stigma informed positive help-seeking experiences and highlights the importance of expecting a non-judgmental reaction as a facilitator.

Table 3. Table of themes of barriers and facilitators to disclosure and help-seeking.

Theme	Sub-themes
(1) The role of stigma & shame	Anticipating stigma as a barrier to help-seeking
	Experiencing negative reactions to disclosure
	The importance of non-judgmental & validating reactions
(2) Lack of formal knowledge & inadequate education	Lack of awareness of formal services
	Transferring inadequate sexting education to inform knowledge
(3) The perceived (in)accessibility of formal support	Harm unrecognized by formal support
	Incongruence with revenge porn support
	The importance of anonymity in formal support

Sub-theme 1.1: anticipating stigma as a barrier to help-seeking

As one's sexuality and sexual behavior is often personal and private, some participants directly described NCII as a "taboo" or "stigmatizing" experience by forcing victim-survivors to breach convention by being publicly seen in a sexualized way ("*there's a lot of stigma... a lot of shame like to it*" – **Adinah**). Anticipating stigma was a barrier to disclosing NCII:

> I did not tell anybody . . . it's very shameful for my nudes to be out there. So I felt like that would demoralize my personality in front of people. – **Harry**

Harry acknowledges how experiencing NCII can be stigmatizing by anticipating that he would be viewed negatively by others for having his nude images in public. His account that experiencing NCII may devalue his identity suggests he feared others would think he had done something wrong. As cultural sexual scripts, norms which guide sexually appropriate behavior (Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005), propose sexual behavior should occur in private (Frank, 2015; Hauck, 2015), the public nature of NCII may violate social scripts. Deviating from cultural sexual scripts can result in backlash such as being negatively valued (Sanchez et al., 2012) which could explain Harry's fear of judgment and his feelings of shame, a self-conscious emotion triggered by threats to one's social self (e.g., loss of social status, rejection from others; Gruenewald et al., 2007). The anticipated stigma and feelings of shame prevented him from telling *anyone* about his experience. Similarly, Amanda did not disclose her experience:

> I was just concerned... What would they think of me that I'd had these photos taken and now they were being shown to the world? . . . It's just the whole embarrassing aspect of it and to this day I still don't know whether anyone I know ever saw them because I don't feel... I could... go and say to any of my friends or family, oh, by the way, did you see naked pictures of me . . . I don't feel like that's a subject I could broach with anybody. – **Amanda**

Amanda's extract highlights how she deemed her experience as unspeakable due to anticipating stigma, fears of being judged and embarrassment. Shame and embarrassment are stigma-associated emotions which can influence disclosure decisions in victim-survivors of sexual violence (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Zinzow et al., 2021).

Participant's concerns of being judged by others centered around either being viewed as "stupid" or "naïve" for sharing the images consensually or for being sexually promiscuous ("dirty," "immoral," "easy," "slut," "whore"):

> I feel like when people see like a girl's sexual image, they're like ohh slut, whore, whatever, like she gets about like, you know, she has no self-respect, whatever. – **Piper**

Despite Piper disclosing to her friends, she expressed concerns others would judge her negatively (as a "slut"). As female sexual scripts suggest women should be self-controlled and sexual gatekeepers (Wiederman, 2005), slut-shaming and being labeled as promiscuous can be a negative judgment of women who deviate from their sexual scripts (Sanchez et al., 2012).

To summarize, participants anticipated stigma and feared being negatively judged which may be informed by the expectation that NCII violates cultural sexual scripts. Anticipating stigma can contribute to shame and embarrassment, commonly reported by victim-survivors of NCII (McGlynn et al., 2021), which can prevent help-seeking (Ruvalcaba &

Eaton, 2020; Short et al., 2017). The fear of being negatively judged resulted in many participants to adopt the stigma management strategy of selectively disclosing their NCII experiences (Flett, 2012; Goffman, 1990), whereas others such as Eric and Amanda did not disclose to anyone, reflecting higher perceptions of stigma (Perry et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2008).

Sub-theme 1.2: experiencing negative reactions to disclosure

Several participants described experiencing negative reactions (e.g., unsympathetic responses that blamed victims, minimized their harm or told victims how they "should" respond) from informal (e.g., friends/family) and formal support (e.g., police). Hannah describes a victim-blaming response she received from her friends and family:

> no one liked the guy, they all knew what kind of person he was. And . . . when I told them it was basically like well you shouldn't have got involved with him in the first place. It's sort of like 'you knew what was gonna happen. Why did you do it? – **Hannah**

The response Hannah received excused the perpetrator and blamed her for not predicting the outcome. Similarly, other victim-survivors experienced this problematic naïve narrative which ignores the manipulation involved and the trusting context in which NCII can occur. This can facilitate self-blame and reputational concerns, as Katherine reported:

> just comments like. . . 'why did she let that happen or she shouldn't have been so stupid?' I supposed just comments that I thought about myself, but I didn't want other people thinking them about me. – **Katherine**

Both Hannah and Katherine describe how initially consensually sharing the images with a partner, could result in others blaming them for being "stupid." These negative reactions and comments may stem from sexual scripts which endorse beliefs that sexting (consensually sharing nude/sexual images) is a dangerous and risky behavior that one *chooses* to engage in (De Ridder, 2019), resulting in victim-blaming attitudes for sending the images in the first place (Arora & Scheiber, 2017). Others believing victim-survivors are responsible for their own victimization may increase the stigma associated with NCII as perceptions of controllability can increase stigma (Major & Schmader, 2018). However, this fails to recognize the betrayal experienced or the perpetrator's responsibility. Additionally, negative reactions were still experienced by those who did not consensually take or share nude/ sexual images, having no knowledge the images existed until after they were disseminated. For example, Paul was secretly filmed having sex, which the perpetrator shared online after Paul ended their casual relationship. Although Paul was not blamed for his experience, he still encountered prejudicial reactions which dismissed his experience and invalidated how he felt by telling him how he "*should*" respond:

> the negative ones have very much been along the lines of, well, you know, you're in this power position 'cause you're white and you're middle class and you're male and you've got a powerful job. So you have this responsibility to stop them doing similar things to people who are less powerful and less privileged. And it's disgraceful that you didn't, and you're just enabling them . . . and then people say things like . . . look at OnlyFans . . . no one thinks this is a big deal anymore . . . no one cares. I'm like, well, yeah, but I care. I don't really care what other people do or don't care about. I care. – **Paul**

These prejudicial responses failed to recognize Paul as a victim by using his identity to position him as an enabler who is accountable for other victim-survivors (and thus more like a perpetrator), but also by normalizing NCII by comparing his non-consensual experience to consensually produced sexual content (e.g., OnlyFans), showing how NCII harm can be pornified (Harder, 2023). Male sexual scripts suggest men are the initiators of sexual behavior and always want sexual behavior (Sanchez et al., 2012), which may explain the failure to recognize men's experiences of non-consensual sexual experiences such as NCII, as Paul expressed. The minimization of the harm experienced and enforcing how Paul "*should*" react (e.g., he should not care), highlights how experiencing NCII can be understood through sexual scripts. Paul shows how NCII can simultaneously be a behavior which deviates from cultural sexual scripts (e.g., being nude/sexual in public), resulting in stigma and shame, and simultaneously be normalized through prejudicial beliefs around the prevalence of online sexual content.

Thus, this sub-theme shows the negative experiences victim-survivors can have when disclosing NCII which centered around judging victim-survivors for being naïve, engaging in openly sexual behavior or dismissing their experience. Negative reactions which judge, blame and minimize victim-survivors' experiences can exacerbate the harm (McGlynn et al., 2021), perpetuate feelings of shame, self-blame, and prevent help-seeking (Flynn et al., 2022; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013) by increasing fears of future judgments. Therefore, victim-survivors of NCII may encounter negative disclosure and victim-blaming reactions similar to those of victim-survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault (Ullman, 2023). The presence of these harmful, prejudicial responses to NCII disclosures evidence the need to consider how these responses can be addressed, the focus of the next theme.

Sub-theme 1.3: the importance of non-judgmental and validating reactions

Due to anticipating stigma and the judgmental reactions some victim-survivors faced, victim-survivors were often selective when disclosing. The most influential facilitator of disclosure participants reported was expecting a non-judgmental response:

> they were the closest friends in my life. I knew they wouldn't be judgmental. You know, I wouldn't of told like my mom or anything because . . . I'd feel more wrong that I done it, if I was telling like a parent, but with my friends, I kind of knew there was no judgment . . . I kind of knew . . . they were there to support me. – **Katherine**

Katherine's explanation for choosing her friends over her parents demonstrates the decision-making involved when deciding whom to tell. The process of identifying non-judgmental people infers an expectation that others (her parents) may have judged her, further evidencing how anticipated stigma can be a barrier (theme 1.1). Like most participants, Katherine chose to disclose to friends over family, which could stem from peers being more familiar with the use of technology in modern dating practices, resulting in less judgment. Participants were also more likely to expect non-judgmental responses from people close to them, where personal or sexual topics were normal and acceptable topics of conversation and/or where support itself is expected as Phoebe examples:

> Well, she's just my best friend, so I tell her everything really about my life and you know, we kind of support each other through a lot of things, and I've told her like, yeah, she's the one

person I tell, like, everything about what's going on. And I can, like, count on her to be a support system for me. And I'm also a support system for her. – **Phoebe**

Phoebe describes how trust in her close friend and their norms of being each other's "support system" led to expectations of a supportive response which facilitated disclosure. Thus, suggesting the norms within interpersonal relationships and social groups may also influence one's perceptions of who is (non-)judgmental and would be un/supportive.

Unsurprisingly, positive disclosures were typically characterized as non-judgmental and supportive reactions from others. However, these often went beyond the absence of blaming or minimizing victim-survivors' experiences; instead, were responses that validated victim-survivors' experiences and emotions. Positive experiences were frequently reported by friends/family but also included formal support organizations, as shown by Maisy:

They (local sexual abuse service) were just really like lovely . . . they said . . . I'm like, really sorry this has happened . . . And were like, right, I'm gonna try and do this, I'm gonna do this. . . It was kind of having the reassurance that . . . someone was trying to help me . . . just knowing that something was being done and like someone was there and I was being heard . . . like someone believes me. – **Maisy**

Maisy explained the value support services can provide by allowing victim-survivors to be listened to and "believe(d)." Recognizing NCII as harmful and validating how victim-survivors felt helped challenge self-blaming thoughts participants had by helping them reframe their experience. Additionally, positive disclosure experiences could help challenge previous negative disclosure reactions:

the way the police treated us, I started then thinking maybe I was wrong, have I overreacted . . . was I crazy or was I not crazy type of thing . . . when I contacted them (Revenge Porn Helpline), it like give us that confirmation and reassurance that I wasn't this crazy, divvy[1] person and I hadn't overreacted and . . . they said . . . I'm sorry for your experience with the police which just made us feel that, well no I wasn't wrong. – **Sarah**

Sarah highlights the importance of formal support's response to NCII. Her adverse police interaction contributed to feelings of self-doubt and blame, which the supportive, non-judgmental response from the Revenge Porn Helpline counteracted by validating her experience. Thus, responses to disclosure can shape victim-survivors' understanding of their experience.

The importance of non-judgmental and validating responses within support services was also recognized by several participants, who despite having not spoken to other victim-survivors, identified how peer support could be useful:

I feel like when you talk to someone that's been through the same thing . . . your thoughts and feelings around it are kind of similar because you both decided to send the image, you both had your images shared without consent, . . . it's that kind of reassurance that you're not alone and that it's more common than we think . . . just the reassurance that it's a safe space to just . . . let it all out. – **Piper**

Piper expressed how peer support can provide a non-judgmental "safe space" for victim-survivors as the shared experience of NCII can validate victim-survivors. This shared understanding could thus reassure victim-survivors and help challenge the stigma by recognizing it is "more common" than victim-survivors may think. Thus, this subtheme has highlighted the importance of non-judgmental reactions and the possible benefits of

peer support for NCII victim-survivors. Non-judgmental reactions can be vital in NCII as the perpetrator can often distort the original context and narrative of what happened when disseminating the victim-survivors' images to illicit their desired reaction from others which can encourage the shaming or blaming of victim-survivors (Sparks, 2022). These non-judgmental reactions should actively challenge sex-negative beliefs (Dodge, 2021) to help validate victim-survivors.

In summary, theme one has discussed how anticipating stigma (e.g., expecting judgmental reactions), actual stigma (e.g., prejudicial, victim-blaming or harm-minimizing responses) and feelings of shame can prevent disclosure and result in negative disclosure experiences. Whereas, expecting non-judgmental reactions and receiving validating responses can facilitate positive disclosure experiences.

Theme 2: lack of formal knowledge and inadequate education

The second theme centered around participants' formal knowledge of NCII (e.g., what constituted an offense, where to get support) and the sources they relied on to gain knowledge about NCII. Subtheme 2.1 highlights the lack of awareness of formal services whilst subtheme 2.2 discusses the impact inadequate sexting education had on informing participant's understanding of NCII and awareness of support.

Subtheme 2.1: lack of awareness of formal services

Participants' knowledge about NCII largely came from informal and/or anecdotal sources such as their peers and media. While they had a good general awareness of NCII (e.g., different motives), they had limited formal knowledge (e.g., what constituted an offense):

> I guess like not knowing, not knowing what the process is and then like assumptions about the process being, like more a burden on me and also... I didn't even know what the law is. Like is there even a law? – **Nina**

Nina's lack of awareness of the law meant she did not know how her experience would be handled, resorting on her relying on her assumptions. Lack of awareness of the criminal legislation around NCII posed a barrier to reporting to the police:

> making awareness about laws and all these things would have really helped me... Had I known those laws I would have straight away told him (perpetrator) [...] I would definitely have gone to the police and report(ed) it straight away. – **Matthew**

Mathew's reflections highlight how not knowing whether his experience of NCII was a criminal offense or not, impacted his help-seeking behavior. Participants' lack of knowledge around the legal process could fuel anxieties by not knowing whether they would be taken seriously, which prevented some victim-survivors from reporting and obtaining justice.

Additionally, when reflecting on non-legal forms of formal support, many participants did not know of any *specific* services for NCII, and often reflected on mental health organizations or domestic abuse services:

> I wasn't aware of any organization. There was general things ... like Mind or I-talk or the Samaritans. There's a lot of women's organizations... but ... I don't know of any charities that are specific to this type of experience. It's more kind of general support networks. – **Rosie**

Rosie's lack of awareness of specific support services for NCII could pose a barrier to accessing formal support. Despite reflecting on "general" formal support services (e.g., Mind, I-talk and Samaritans, all mental health charities/organizations in the UK), the stigmatizing nature outlined in theme 1 could prevent victim-survivors from accessing them as they may not be considered appropriate for their specific NCII experiences, and thus, not meet their needs. Ryan further supports how lack of awareness of specific services was a barrier:

> I've never seen an advert where it's like 'had nudes shared against your will? Contact this number and we can be there to help. No judgment' ... I've never seen a charity say that explicitly, and if they did at the time then maybe I would have (contacted them). – **Ryan**

Ryan highlights the importance of specific services that "*explicitly*" offer support for NCII, suggesting a desire for a specialist NCII service. Thus, further showing how commonly known support services deemed as "catch-all" services, such as Samaritans, may not feel appropriate for victim-survivors needs. As the UK already has a national support service specifically for NCII, the Revenge Porn Helpline, this finding highlights how a lack of awareness of these services can hinder help-seeking. Thus, this subtheme highlights the lack of awareness participants had of the law surrounding NCII and the specific NCII support services available to them. This lack of knowledge was partly due to a lack of education on NCII as many participants had not received any education about NCII. Subsequently, participants' knowledge was predominately informed by anecdotal sources such as peer groups and media, which rarely provided informative or instrumental support.

Subtheme 2:2 transferring inadequate sexting education to inform NCII experiences

Conversely, to the lack of awareness seen in subtheme 2.1, this subtheme highlights how formal education could influence how participants experienced NCII. Some of the younger participants had received some education related to NCII, typically reflecting on the sexting education they experienced at secondary school or sixth form (*"We briefly touched on it in year 11"* – **Piper**). However, applying knowledge obtained from adolescent sexting education to adult experiences of NCII can be problematic. As producing and sharing sexual content of those under the age of 18 (including consensual sexting practices) is a criminal offense (Arthur, 2019), education often portrays sexting as risky behavior and endorses an abstinence message by shaming and blaming victims, excusing perpetrators' responsibility and using scare tactics (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Zauner, 2021). Receiving victim-blaming-centered sexting education can impact adult victim-survivors' experiences of NCII:

> It was ridiculous and it was completely focused on the girls sending pictures (consensually) rather than the boys not sharing it (non-consensually). I don't really remember many boys who were actually in trouble, whereas I just remember loads of girls always crying and like being taken into meetings with like other male teachers and it just being a whole ridiculous situation of them being blamed for it. – **Katie**

Despite NCII being considered different from sexting (Ringrose et al., 2022), Katie's reflection on her adolescent sexting education shows the long-lasting impression the gendered and victim-blaming message can have, demonstrating how victim-survivors may draw on their sexting education to understand NCII experiences. By putting the

responsibility on female victim-survivors to not engage in sexual behavior, the educational message may reinforce cultural sexual scripts that women should exert self-control of their sexuality and be sexual gatekeepers (Sanchez et al., 2012; Wiederman, 2005). Deviating from these scripts, may result in the consequences to which Katie alludes.

The victim-blaming message from schools can be internalized by adult victim-survivors and prevent help-seeking by making victim-survivors feel responsible, contributing to feelings of shame, downplaying the harm they have experienced, not recognizing that an offense has occurred and increasing the anticipation of stigma, as Joanna reports:

> I kind of like victim-blamed myself... I was kind of just telling myself like ohh like if I didn't want it to happen, then I shouldn't have sent it. Or kind of like the whole mentality of like 'boys will be boys.' Like, what did I expect? [...] I feel like the reason I was thinking that is because of the message that I went through seven years of like school and sixth form that was like spreading that message definitely impacted the way I thought. – **Joanna**

Joanna expresses how her sexting education perpetuated feelings of self-blame despite experiencing this in adulthood. This is unsurprising given educational sexting videos focus on how the harm can be avoided by not engaging in consensual sexting (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). This narrative can contribute to self-blame amongst victim-survivors and increases expectations of negative reactions from others, such as those seen in subtheme 1.2, which can prevent help-seeking. Therefore, the educational message given during school on adolescent-centered sexting can inform and influence adult experiences of NCII and inhibit help-seeking.

Theme two has demonstrated how victim-survivors are often unaware of what support exists and the current criminal legislation which can prevent them from accessing support or reporting their victimization. Limited education and reliance on an adolescent-centered sexting education can contribute to a lack of instrumental knowledge and can inform adult victim-survivors' disclosure decisions and experiences by endorsing a victim blaming, stigmatizing message which can negatively impact one's self appraisal and prevent help-seeking.

Theme 3: the perceived (In)accessibility of formal support

The third and final theme centers around participants' perceptions of how accessible (or inaccessible) formal support was deemed to be for NCII experiences. Subtheme 3.1 and 3.2 explore how perceptions of support services prevented accessing support when victim-survivors expected the services would not recognize the harm they have experienced or when they deemed their experience as incompatible with who the support is for. Finally, subtheme 3.3 discusses the importance of anonymity as a facilitator for accessing formal support.

Sub-theme 3.1: harm unrecognized by formal support

As subtheme 2.1 shows, many participants were unaware of support services specifically for NCII. Thus, participants often reflected on formal support services for mental health, sexual abuse or domestic violence. This support was often regarded as not appropriate or inaccessible by participants as Sally shows when reflecting on sexual abuse support:

> I always feel like I don't count when it comes to the images . . . it's almost like it's invalid. I just keep telling myself like it could be worse . . . so I never even feel like I can go to those services for what happened. . . it's still something happening without your consent of a sexual nature, which classifies me entry on those things. But. . . It feels like no one really cares unless it was physical instead of cyber. – **Sally**

Sally describes how despite feeling support services for sexual abuse should provide support for NCII, she felt they would not take her online experience seriously. These perceptions prevented her from accessing formal support and can leave victim-survivors feeling neglected and unrecognized by services. Thus, victim-survivors' perceptions of the accessibility and appropriateness of support can influence help-seeking decisions.

Furthermore, support that endorses stereotypical messaging can ostracize certain victim groups. For example, many of the male participants reported that they did not think NCII could happen to them due to the gendered victim narrative that women are victims:

> it makes you feel like it's not something that happens to you so there must be something wrong with you. . . I was in a bar recently . . . they had all these different posters up. And one of them was 'think before you send,' but of course it was pictures of like teenagers. Mostly teenage girls . . . I get why they're doing that, because that's who they're marketing it to. . . But I think it's like anything, if you don't see yourself represented in those messages then it makes it really difficult for you to identify in that cohort, so it made it very difficult for me to think, oh, this is something that could happen to me. And so the sources of support . . . that are out there and are marketed and advertised, you think that they're not for you. – **Paul**

Paul highlights how the gendered messaging around NCII, including support, did not include male victim-survivors and thus failed to recognize the harm male victim-survivors can experience. This lack of recognition of the harm experienced can thus invalidate men's experiences and prevent male victim-survivors from accessing support as they did not believe the support was for them. Thus, support services may be deemed to be inaccessible and inappropriate for certain groups of victim-survivors. This is similarly seen in the domestic abuse sector, which has been described as a "female domain," that does not recognize male victim-survivors (Hester et al., 2012) resulting in male victims to perceive the support services as inaccessible, subsequently preventing help-seeking (Huntley et al., 2019). This has been attributed to societal expectations and male stereotypes which struggle to recognize men as victims (Hine, 2019). Given many studies found similar rates of NCII victimization regardless of gender (Gassó et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021), the endorsement of a gendered narrative which can ostracize victim-survivors may be particularly concerning.

Thus, this subtheme highlights how victim-survivors' perceptions of the accessibility, availability and appropriateness of support can influence their decisions of accessing formal support. Services that are perceived as not recognizing victim-survivors' harm because of the nature of NCII (e.g., online) and victim-survivor characteristics (e.g., gender), can leave victim-survivors of NCII feeling invisible and ostracized and unable to access support. As the harm victim-survivors of NCII experience can be comparable to sexual abuse (Bates, 2017), this finding highlights the need to increase the accessibility of support services which the next sub-theme will explore.

Sub-theme 3.2: incongruence with revenge porn support

As many participants were unaware of specific support for NCII, participants were informed about the UK's national support service for NCII, the Revenge Porn Helpline. Despite participants valuing the support offered by the service, particularly the services ability to help remove images, many participants felt the name made the support inaccessible, as it did not reflect their experience:

> it's not something I thought would address my needs … it's quite a shocking name as well, because certainly in my case it wasn't like any sort of revenge and it wasn't what I would call pornographic necessarily in nature. – **Alex**

By adopting the media-generated term "Revenge Porn," the service also adopts people's perceptions of what revenge porn is and is not. For example, participants often assumed the service would only help 1) revenge-motivated sharing of images 2) more extreme/explicit imagery such as portraying sexual acts and/or videos rather than nude photos and 3) within a relationship context/after a relationship breakdown. Alex reflects on how their experience does not meet these perceived requirements for accessing support as theirs was not revenge-motivated or pornographic, thus feeling the support was not for them. This demonstrates how the revenge element of the name can prevent victim-survivors contacting the support by ostracizing victim-survivors who had their images shared for non-revenge motives (e.g., sexual bragging etc.). Aisha further elaborates on how using porn in the name would prevent her from contacting the service:

> I wouldn't (contact them)… the porn part of that name, makes it disturbing because it just, makes you jump into conclusions about what do they mean by that? – **Aisha**

As porn is associated with sex work which is highly stigmatized (Weitzer, 2018), including porn in the name may add more stigma to an already stigmatizing experience. Victim-survivors may also be particularly aware and sensitive to this language, due to the anticipated stigma and their concerns of being judged as sexually promiscuous (e.g., slut-shamed), as outlined in theme 1. Thus, using this terminology is likely to evoke further negative associations which could prevent victim-survivors from accessing the helpline and could lead to additional stigmatization of victim-survivors and further harm. Participants discussed how the specificity of the name "revenge porn" fails to recognize the harm caused by non-revenge motivated NCII:

> I actually feel like that almost belittles what I- like hearing that … sounds like what I went through isn't as bad, when really I experienced the same violation, it just wasn't done with ill intent. – **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth highlights how the name excluded and ostracized non-revenge-motivated NCII victim-survivors by minimizing the harm experienced. Similarly, Ryan expresses how the name evoked concerns that his experience would not be taken seriously:

> This wasn't a consensual relationship long term, and then they were then getting back at me … there was no ill will between us… for me it wasn't revenge porn. So it would make me wonder … would they take it seriously? … I would just feel so dumb if … they were just like, oh, it's nothing we can do, it's not revenge porn or something. I think it would actually make me take a step back in terms of coming to terms with it. – **Ryan**

Thus, the name, Revenge Porn Helpline, may prevent victim-survivors from accessing support by reinforcing stereotypical notions of revenge porn and dismissing some victim-survivors of NCII. This supports how problematic the term "revenge porn" is (Maddocks, 2018; McGlynn et al., 2017), and shows how terminology can impact accessibility to support services.

Sub-theme 3.3: the importance of anonymity

A final influential factor on whether formal support was accessible or not, related to the importance of anonymity. Lack of anonymity was identified as a barrier in reporting processes. For example, a few participants described how some websites requested victim-survivors to upload identification to get their images removed which they were not comfortable doing. However, the importance of anonymity was most commonly discussed in relation to the criminal legislation around NCII. As most participants were not aware of the laws (theme 2.1), participants were informed about the criminal legislation in the UK and asked about their opinion on it. Most identified the lack of automatic anonymity granted to victims[2] as a significant issue which could prevent victim-survivors reporting NCII to the police:

> I think that is also shocking, in that, it's almost asking people not to report it because of all the kind of stigma around it. It's almost like they're reducing the ability for the victims to come forward. It almost like they don't want to deal with it so they're making it as hard as possible for victims to report it. – **Katie**

As Katie explains, given the exposing nature of the experience and the associated stigma, anonymity was important to victim-survivors. As the criminal legislation in the UK, at the time, considered NCII as a communications offense, victim-survivors were not granted automatic anonymity when entering the criminal justice system. Thus, victim-survivors who reported NCII risk further exposure of their images and identity as the media can choose to report their experience. This led some victim-survivors to state that had they known the law they still would not have reported it to the police when they realized anonymity was not granted. This finding supports existing research outlining how the law was inappropriate for victim-survivors of NCII and created barriers for them accessing support and justice (Rackley et al., 2021).

However, anonymity was also identified as important for accessing support beyond reporting to the police, as Adinah shows when discussing the importance of anonymity for victim support services for NCII:

> if it was online, and I was anonymous . . . I would have felt a lot more comfortable . . . I think it was more like people recognizing me and that I've been through this and just how they would have viewed me. . . But if . . . you guys could express what . . . people have been going through . . . without needing to . . . show my face, I feel like that would have been helpful for me. – **Adinah**

Adinah highlights how anonymous support options could increase the accessibility of formal support services by addressing the anticipated stigma and reducing fears of recognition and that others would judge them. Thus, anonymous options can be a stigma-management strategy which can facilitate access to formal support by allowing victim-survivors to receive the benefits of support without experiencing additional harm through their identification. Furthermore, as the nature of NCII often forces victim-survivors to be

publicly exposed in an identifiable way, anonymous options can allow victim-survivors to regain a level of control of their identity. As regaining control and recovering one's identity are important processes for recovering from abuse (Flasch et al., 2017), this anonymity may enable victim-survivors to start engaging in this process. Adinah also suggests how online platforms may best accommodate the anonymity required, highlighting that despite NCII being a technology-facilitated behavior (Henry et al., 2020), the internet could facilitate support for victim-survivors through its anonymity.

Thus, this subtheme identifies the importance of anonymity to victim-survivors' access to formal support including police and support services. This supports the legislative recommendations posed by Rackley et al. (2021) arguing the need to provide anonymity to NCII victim-survivors who access the criminal justice system.

To summarize, theme three has shown how perceptions of formal support can influence victim-survivors' decisions to access them. Support that is perceived to not recognize NCII victim-survivors or the harm they have experienced is perceived to be inaccessible. Likewise, the messaging and terminology around NCII can also reduce the accessibility of support. Whereas support that explicitly supports victim-survivors of NCII and offers anonymous options are perceived as more accessible.

Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to contribute to the NCII and help-seeking literature by adopting a victim-focused exploration of disclosure decisions and help-seeking experiences of victim-survivors of NCII. The paper aimed to identify barriers and facilitators to accessing support and as a result, develop recommendations for practitioners on supporting NCII victim-survivors. Overall, the findings show victim-survivors of NCII had varied help-seeking experiences: most accessed informal support (friends/family) whilst others accessed formal support (e.g., police, organizations) or told no one. The themes developed from the participants interview data show how perceived stigma and one's awareness and perceptions of formal support are influential in victim-survivors' decisions to access support.

Collectively the themes support that NCII can be a stigmatizing experience (Adler & Chenoa Cooper, 2022; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021) as victim-survivors both anticipated and experienced stigma from others, which posed a barrier to help-seeking, as similarly identified in intimate partner violence and sexual assault (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Wright et al., 2022; Zinzow et al., 2021). This finding supports previous findings which identified stigma-associated emotions, such as shame and embarrassment, as barriers for victim-survivors of NCII from disclosing their experience (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020; Short et al., 2017) and how prejudicial reactions could result in the victim-blaming attitudes often reported in attitudinal studies (Flynn et al., 2022; Gavin & Scott, 2019; Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020). The associated stigma may be informed by sexual scripts which can determine our understanding of appropriate sexual behavior and can result in backlash for deviating from these such as judgment and rejection (Sanchez et al., 2012; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005). As experiencing negative, prejudicial reactions to disclosure can exacerbate victim-survivors' harm (McGlynn et al., 2021), perpetuate feelings of shame and self-blame and prevent help-seeking (Flynn et al., 2022; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013), it is important for a stigma-aware/informed approach for supporting NCII victim-survivors and to consider how stigmatization of victim-survivors in society could be reduced or challenged (recommendation 1, Table 4).

Table 4. Recommendations for support services.

1. Reducing stigma by providing a non-victim blaming narrative and responding to victim-survivors' disclosures appropriately by validating their experiences As NCII can be stigmatizing, with many victim-survivors fearing judgment from others, challenging stigma is crucial. The message around NCII should be considered in both adult and adolescent education and awareness campaigns. Promoting a non-victim blaming message that holds perpetrators accountable and recognizes all victim and perpetrator types (regardless of gender) could protect against stigma.   Formal support services, such as support organizations and police, should adopt a stigma and trauma-informed approach. Practitioners dealing with NCII disclosures should provide victim-survivors the opportunity to voice their experience and offer a non-judgmental and validating response which recognizes victim-survivors' harm.
2. Improving awareness and education of NCII by providing practical knowledge and reducing stigma through an inclusive message Steps could be taken to improve awareness of the law and support services. This could include government-developed informative campaigns on NCII as well as careful considerations of the education message given at school level. Given the age implications, there may be a need to educate adults on NCII, which could occur in higher education (e.g., colleges and universities) or by incorporating NCII in employers' sexual harassment training.   To increase the general awareness of support services specifically for NCII, organizations could increase their visibility through advertisements and media campaigns as well as forming partnerships with businesses, organizations and higher education providers. For example, they could provide educational workshops on NCII and the support they offer to students (or student support service providers) in higher education. Alternatively, working with organizations to develop materials such as videos on NCII and their support services as part of sexual harassment or online safety training.
3. Improving the accessibility of support by explicitly challenging preconceptions Despite theoretically being accessible, support may be perceived as inaccessible by victim-survivors of NCII. Thus, organization who can support NCII victim-survivors should take steps to challenge perceptions such as *explicitly* promoting an inclusive message within their services (e.g., on their websites, posters etc.). For example: • Refraining from the "revenge porn" terminology to a more inclusive term that incorporates all forms of non-consensual sharing of images (e.g., intimate image abuse, image-based sexual abuse). • Using inclusive, non-gendered language and imagery that recognizes all victim and perpetrator types. • Validate the harm NCII can cause. e.g., if domestic/sexual abuse organizations offer support for NCII explicitly stating that they provide support for online abuse, (with examples of what this may look like or includes), could help challenge preconceptions that this will be taken less seriously than physical abuse.
4. Providing anonymous options for victims and peer support platforms Formal support should provide anonymous options for victim-survivors where possible and could consider the possible benefits of facilitated and/or moderated peer support opportunities.

Additionally, a lack of formal knowledge and education can contribute to victim-survivors' stigmatization and pose a barrier to help-seeking. As there is a general lack of awareness of the criminalization of NCII (Powell et al., 2020), most participants did not know whether what they experienced was an offense or where they could get support, which prevented help-seeking. Lack of awareness may be partly due to a lack of education about NCII or a reliance on adolescent-centered sexting education received during school or sixth form (11–18 years old). As education often promotes abstinence by shaming and blaming victims, whilst excusing perpetrators' responsibility for dissemination (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Zauner, 2021), the message given to young people can reinforce the stigmatization of victim-survivors. Thus, reliance on adolescent sexting, which is conceptually different to NCII (Ringrose et al., 2022), to inform adult experience is practically and psychologically problematic. Practically, this leaves people ill-informed about criminal legislation for adult experiences, their rights as victims, and the support available to them. Psychologically, the victim-blaming message used to encourage abstinence from sexting can stigmatize NCII victim-survivors and be internalized into shame and self-blame which can perpetuate fears of judgment and prevent them from seeking support. Thus, the research findings have implications for the need for education and awareness campaigns to make more adults aware of the criminalization of the behavior and the support available to victim-survivors (recommendation 2,

Table 4). Not only could this legitimize victim-survivors, but it could also reduce perpetration and the negative harmful reactions victim-survivors may face.

Uniquely, this study's exploration of perceptions of formal support shows how formal support services can contribute to victim-survivors' stigmatization. Support services can invalidate victim-survivors by using language or messaging which fails to recognize the harm they have experienced, thus preventing help-seeking. For example, by adopting the problematic term "revenge porn" (Maddocks, 2018), the Revenge Porn Helpline may further stigmatize victim-survivors and ostracize those who do not fit the stereotype of "revenge porn." As the helpline is highly valued by victim-survivors who access it (Bond & Tyrrell, 2018) and participants desired services for NCII specifically over the commonly known catch-all support services, this finding suggests changing the name to be more inclusive and less stigmatizing could facilitate victim-survivors' access to support. The findings also suggest other formal services which support NCII victim-survivors (e.g., sexual violence or domestic abuse organizations) should adopt a more inclusive message which *explicitly* recognizes online forms of abuse as harmful as physical. Additionally, this study showed how adopting a gendered and heteronormative narrative that women are victims and men are perpetrators can be a barrier to accessing support by ostracizing non-female identifying victims-survivors, as similarly found in male victim-survivors of domestic abuse (Hester et al., 2012; Hine et al., 2019; Huntley et al., 2019). Thus, arguments that exaggerating gender differences within NCII can produce harmful consequences (Champion et al., 2022) which can ostracize male victim-survivors and non-binary and transgender individuals. Utilizing a non-gendered narrative could increase the accessibility of support for non-female identifying victim-survivors which is imperative considering studies have found men and women may experience similar rates of victimization (Clancy et al., 2020; Douglass et al., 2020; Gassó et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021) and distress (Champion et al., 2022). Furthermore, adopting a non-gendered narrative would reduce the underlining heteronormative assumptions, increasing the accessibility of support for non-heterosexual individuals who have been found to be more likely to experience NCII (Powell et al., 2022). Subsequently, practitioner-focused recommendations to increase the perceived accessibility of support by challenging stereotypes and adopting an inclusive message have been suggested (recommendation 3, Table 4).

Additionally, anonymity and expecting non-judgmental reactions were identified as facilitators to disclosure and accessing support. Thus, facilitators are options which reduce the associated stigma (e.g., where they are not expecting to be judged/stigmatized and/or where they can be anonymous, so the NCII stigma is not directly associated with them). This has implications for formal support services which could facilitate help-seeking by providing anonymous options for accessing support and by ensuring they adopt a non-judgmental and validating response to disclosures. The desire for anonymous support highlights the value of the anonymous options provided by the Revenge Porn Helpline and VOIC (Revenge Porn Helpline, n.d.; VOIC, 2014). Furthermore, the need for non-judgmental support led some participants to identify the potential benefits of peer support with other NCII victim-survivors. Although not all participants wanted to engage in peer support, as some wanted to move on from their experience, many felt this could be a useful form of emotional support by feeling less alone, sharing coping strategies and each other's stories. This supports Sparks (2022) who argued that having the opportunity to voice one's story is beneficial for NCII victim-survivors as the perpetrator's narrative, which is often

distorted and demeans the victim, often becomes the dominant discourse. Subsequently, the original context of what happened and the victim-survivor's story (e.g., one of betrayal) can often be overlooked. Therefore, demonstrating the value of VOIC (Victims of Internet Crime), a non-funded website set up by a victim-survivor of NCII, that fosters peer support by providing a platform for victim-survivors to share their story and/or the opportunity to join a private Facebook support group to interact with other victim-survivors (VOIC, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

This research provides an in-depth exploration of help-seeking decisions with a focus on providing practical implications for formal support services. As there is limited research exploring the help-seeking experiences and decisions of NCII victim-survivors, this paper contributes to the help-seeking literature by providing novel insights into this previously unexplored population. For example, this paper is the first, to the authors knowledge, to recognize how perceptions of victim support services may be perceived as inaccessible to NCII victim-survivors. Additionally, this paper has shown how sexual scripts may be influential in help-seeking behaviors by informing the stigma around NCII. Thus, this paper has contributed to the NCII and help-seeking literature, whilst also considering the implications the findings can have on practice, by producing recommendations for improving the accessibility of support for victim-survivors focusing on education, increasing service visibility and reducing stigma through the adoption of a more inclusive narrative.

A strength of the research is the participant sample had more gender diversity than existing qualitative studies on NCII victimization, as 32.2% of the sample identified as being male (25.8%) or non-binary (6.5%). As most qualitative studies on NCII victimization have been limited to female-only samples (e.g., Bates, 2017; Huber, 2023) or female-dominated samples (e.g., McGlynn et al., 2021; 89% female), this study explored NCII in a more inclusive sample, extending our knowledge beyond the female-centered narrative. However, given this paper suggests there may be gender differences in relation to victim-survivors' access to support, there may be unique challenges and needs for different populations. Future research could explore the specific needs of these different populations in more depth, to understand whether tailored interventions are needed.

Additionally, to increase the anonymity of participants, limited demographic information was obtained. Therefore, it is unknown how diverse the sample is beyond gender and sexual orientation. Given experiences may vary depending on other demographic characteristics (e.g., religion, ethnicity), future research could explore socio-cultural factors by exploring different victim-survivor groups specifically as marginalized groups may face additional unique barriers. Furthermore, despite the diverse experiences within the study sample, there are many ways NCII can occur (e.g., differing motives, perpetrators, methods of distribution and image obtainment), which could influence disclosure and help-seeking. Therefore, future research could explore these different contexts. For example, whether the type of relationship with the perpetrator influences decisions to report to the police.

Finally, the broad recruitment strategy used allowed participants who had not sought formal support to be accessed, allowing a fuller understanding of barriers to support to be captured. However, few participants in the sample had accessed support from formal organizations, partly due to the low uptake from support organizations to share the research because of their limited resources which were

particularly strained during the pandemic when data collection occurred. As such, future research could explore disclosure experiences related to accessing support organizations specifically, which may vary depending on the type of service accessed (e.g., a service specifically for NCII, such as The Revenge Porn Helpline, compared to services for mental health or sexual or domestic abuse).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, four recommendations for practitioners have been developed (Table 4) which aim to reduce the stigmatization of NCII and increase the awareness and accessibility of support services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research identified several barriers and facilitators to help-seeking amongst victim-survivors of NCII. These findings evidence how central stigma and perceptions of accessibility and availability of support are in disclosure decisions and experiences. The study has discussed how a multilayer approach is needed to address the stigma by improving the educational message and narrative around NCII, improving service visibility and adopting more inclusive practices which recognize all victim-survivors and the diverse nature of NCII experiences.

Notes

1. Divvy is English slang to describe someone as stupid or silly.
2. This research was conducted when NCII was considered a malicious communications offense under the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, meaning victims were not granted anonymity if they reported to the police. Thus, the interviews reflect this legislation. Since the research has been conducted, the Online Safety Bill, passed in October 2023, recategorized NCII under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which provides victims reporting NCII anonymity.

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