From Digital Intimacy to Digital Violence: Revenge Pornography and Mental Health of LGBTIQ+ People

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Introduction

Revenge pornography (RP, the non-consensual sharing of intimate content) may cause psychological harm **comparable to other forms of sexual violence**, such as:
- depression
- anxiety
- shame
- suicidal thoughts (Bates, 2016; Bitton et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2022).

Additional challenges for LGBTIQ+ people:
- Involuntary outing (Gilden, 2023)
- Greater barriers to help-seeking (Pijlman et al., 2024).

AIM: To explore the perceived psychological impacts of revenge pornography and coping strategies of LGBTIQ+ people through semi-structured interviews.

RQ1: How do LGBTIQ+ individuals cope with and perceive the impacts of RP on their mental health?

RQ2: How do LGBTIQ+ individuals perceive the non-consensual disclosure of their intimate content in relation to their sexual and gender identity?

Methodology

A qualitative method study based on online interviews; ***N* = 14** people identifying as LGBTIQ+ aged 18 to 47.

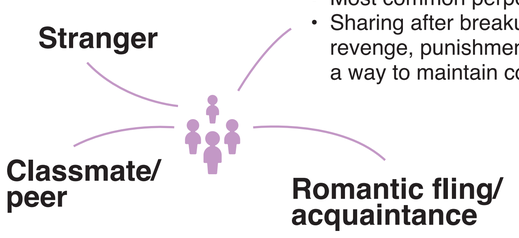
We used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and divided results into 3 sections and several sub-themes.

Results *Experience With Revenge Pornography*

What?

- **Consensually sent images misused**
- **Images taken without knowledge or consent**
- **AI-generated or altered content**

Who?



Ex-partner
- Most common perpetrator
- Sharing after breakup as revenge, punishment, or a way to maintain control

How?

Non-consensual dissemination
- Shared on social media
- Sharing intimate material among friends, family or acquaintance

Queer Identity and Revenge Pornography

1) Minority Stress as a Risk Factor

Almost all participants have encountered insults, prejudice, or attacks on their sexual or gender identity at some point in their lives. Queer people thus enter this situation with an existing burden (Powell et al., 2018). They also linked the dissemination of their content to being perceived as "different", consistent with the Minority Stress Framework, which highlights the exposure of sexual minorities to stigma, harassment, and victimisation (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021).

> ***"I had mental health problems just due to hiding my true identity. The sharing of those photos reinforced the feeling that I'm a bad person."***
> - Alex (24, transgender man)

2) Involuntary Coming Out

For some participants who were not fully out, RP led to involuntary disclosure of their identity, causing anxiety and a loss of control. Although this affected only a few, the impact of being outed was sometimes harder to process than the leak itself.

> ***"People around me took it much harder, rather than if a video of me with a girl were to leak."***
> - Rory (33, transgender woman)

3) Queer Identity as a Coping Mechanism

Queer identity also served as a source of resilience for some participants; involuntary disclosure brought a sense of relief, as they no longer had to hide their identity.

> ***"On one hand, it was bad, but on the other, it was good because I did not have to hide anymore, I didn't have to worry about certain things as much."***
> - Mary (29, demisexual cis-woman)

Coping Strategies

1. Forms of help and support

1) Personal Networks

Close friends and partners were the most valued source of support, though some hesitated to turn to family out of fear or because they were not yet out.

> ***"My friends were there for me, but especially my best friend, who at the time was just like, 'Hey, don't worry about it'."***
> - Alex (24, transgender man)

2) Turning to Alcohol and Self-Medication

A few turned to alcohol or self-medication short-term, later replaced by different coping strategies.

> ***"I asked my friend if she could give me something for my anxiety. She gave me some medicine. That helped me suppress those feelings somehow."***
> - Sam (18, transgender woman)

3) Public Statement

Few participants proactively addressed the situation, e.g., posting a public statement gave some participants a sense of agency.

> ***"I posted a story on Instagram explaining how things really were. I asked people not to share that information any further and not to spread it by word of mouth among others."***
> - Jordan (21, pansexual non-binary)

4) Institutional Support

Nearly half sought therapy, easing the recovery.

> ***"I started going to therapy again, where I could talk about it."***
> - Taylor (27, transgender man)

5) Technological Solutions

Many reported and blocked perpetrators online, though this didn't always relieve fear that the content could reappear.

> ***"I asked YouTube to take it down."***
> - Larry (47, gay cis-man)

6) Solidarity Experience

Some highlighted that it helped when they had found someone who also had experience with RP, and were thus able to relate to them and better understand the situation.

> ***"An acquaintance once told me that something similar had happened to them. I felt that this helped them better understand my situation."***
> - Blake (21, queer)

2. Barriers to Seeking Help

The most common barrier to seeking help was shame and fear of others' reactions, especially among those who felt their experience didn't fit a "classic" definition of RP. Others simply didn't know whom to turn to, pointing to a need for more accessible information and resources.

1) Feeling Ashamed

> ***"The biggest barrier there was that sense of shame and the thought of what people would say to me, like, 'Why are you sending pictures to strange men?' or 'Are you stupid?'."***
> - Ash (22, queer non-binary)

2) Lacking Information

> ***"Since I was really scared and didn't really know who to turn to or what to do about it, I didn't actually take legal action."***
> - Taylor (27, transgender man)

Perceived Impact on Mental Health

1) Persistent Psychological Distress

Anxiety, depression and shame persisted for weeks to months. Participants linked the worst impacts not to the leak itself but to its consequences, e.g., harassment, body-shaming, lost friendships.

> ***"It was so bad that I could hardly get out of bed to go to the toilet."***
> - Riley (19, queer cis-woman)

2) Immediate Emotional Distress

Immediately after learning their content had been disseminated, participants described shock, anger, panic and shame they could not escape.

> ***"It was a huge blow, it was just coming at me from all sides."***
> - Mary (29, demisexual cis-woman)

3) Interpersonal Consequences

The experience undermined participants' ability to trust others in future relationships; several lost friends, and new partners had to work to earn their trust.

> ***"The partner I'm with now, well, they had a really hard time with me. In order to build some trust with me, it took quite a long time, and they really had to work at it."***
> - Mary (29, demisexual cis-woman)

4) Disruption of Daily Life

For participants still in school, RP disrupted daily life, leading some to change schools or pause their studies. These consequences add further burden and harm, especially for young people (Hellevik et al., 2025).

> ***"I took a year off school. It paused my life permanently."***
> - Riley (19, queer cis-woman)

5) Loss of Control and Safety

Most participants felt helpless after the leak, losing control over both the content and their online identity, which prompted many to withdraw from social media or become more cautious online.

> ***"I stopped feeling like I had things under control. And that it actually affects my online space, too, because anything can show up there at any time without my consent. I'm just losing that control and privacy in every way."***
> - Sara (19, pansexual cis-woman)

Conclusion

- RP can take many forms, ranging from **dissemination by an ex-partner for revenge to extortion for money** (e.g., Bates, 2016; McGlynn et al., 2020) → experience of RP cannot be understood as a homogeneous phenomenon, but rather as multiple forms of digital sexual violence.
- Participants perceived the impact of RP:
  - immediately, through shock, panic, and shame,
  - persistently, through anxiety and, in some cases, depression, which shows that RP is **comparable to sexual assault or rape** = survivors similarly experience anxiety, shame, and self-blame → these feelings can be a barrier to seeking help (Bates, 2016; Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019; Zinzow et al., 2021)
- Impact on LGBTIQ+ people is influenced by:
  - pre-existing minority stress, prejudice and hostility (Meyer, 2003)
  - losing control over when and to whom their sexual/gender identity is disclosed (Gilden, 2023; Monea, 2022), causing additional distress.

  → RP added to an existing burden through homophobic harassment accompanying the dissemination itself.
- **Survivors rely mainly on informal support;** shame, fear, and lack of information keep many from seeking formal help, e.g., no one turned to the police → highlighting the need to increase awareness that RP is a criminal offence from 2026 in Czechia.
- Findings point to a need for identity-affirming, accessible support structures for LGBTIQ+ survivors of RP.

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