



# The Naked Truth

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How intimate image sharing is reshaping our world.

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## Introduction

The word “grooming,” defined as “building a relationship with a person who is at risk so that they can be abused and/or manipulated into doing things,” first appeared in the 1990s. Before then, the word used to describe this type of activity was “seduction”.

What happened in the 1990s that moved the needle from seduction to grooming? The missing preverb is the word “online”. Grooming certainly existed, in the modern sense of the word, before access to the internet became widespread. But chatrooms and then social media enabled the activity to become virtual and anonymised, and massively extended reach for potential bad actors. Technology made grooming easier, and as such its occurrence ramped up.

Fast-forward 15 to 20 years and a new expression entered common discourse; the term “revenge porn” was coined in 2007 and refers to the activity of sharing sexually explicit images or videos of a person posted on the internet without their consent. The intent is not always one of revenge hence the creation of an alternative term “intimate image abuse (IIA).” But “revenge porn” certainly generates more attention in the media.

Again, this activity is not new, so what had changed to make it so prevalent that it ushered in a new term? The widespread ownership of Wi-Fi-enabled camera phones and the deployment of 3G networks in the mid-2000s made capturing and sharing images a whole lot easier.

Putting a name to a social problem moves an activity out of the shadows, it stops being about an individual who might have seen their situation as too embarrassing to speak out about, to something structural. Something that warrants the introduction of laws to protect against it.

The advent of smartphones with much higher resolution cameras, and the introduction of 4G networks accelerated incidences of revenge porn. In April 2015, the UK became one of the first countries in the world to introduce a law making it illegal to

disclose private sexual photographs and films with the intent to cause distress.

Online violence though, such as IIA is rife. In fact, it is a growing challenge globally. In the first nine months of 2023, the number of phone calls and online reports to the Revenge Porn Helpline, a service supporting all adult victims of intimate image abuse, **was more than 10,000 in the UK alone**. This is already well above 2022’s total of 8,924. The introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) and “deepfakes” is expected to worsen the issue.

Regulation has an impact, but the private sector should take some responsibility. If not from a moral standpoint, then to protect themselves against possible future litigation. Kaspersky commissioned one of the most extensive global polls ever conducted to shine a light on the issues surrounding the sharing of intimate images online. This was done with guidance from a range of industry partners as well as SWGfL, a charity dedicated to empowering the safe and secure use of technology globally and responsible for founding and hosting the UK’s Revenge Porn Helpline.

Our research reveals an inherent and growing normalisation of a critical societal problem. A public seemingly aware of the risks but, particularly amongst the younger age groups, prepared to share their most intimate images without acknowledging the potential long-term vulnerabilities.

## Methodology

The research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 9033 General respondents (16+) in the UK, Belgium, Netherlands, Colombia, France, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Peru, USA, Spain and Brazil. The data was collected between 17.05.2024 and 24.05.2024.

Respondents were asked about their experiences of saving, sharing and receiving intimate images, the devices used to share material, the measures being taken to protect their privacy, and who they believe to be the perpetrators of this form of online abuse.



Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

## Key findings

The data demonstrates a creeping normalisation of saving and sharing 'nudes.' The past quarter of a century has seen the introduction of technology that makes capturing and sharing intimate images easy. We have also witnessed wholesale changes in behaviour and attitude towards online dating which has evolved from being stigmatised and relatively uncommon to being absolutely ubiquitous. The popularity of online dating has accelerated the sharing of intimate messages AKA "sexting," all of which points to a sea change when it comes to the rules of engagement around social and romantic connections in the modern world.

- › 22% of respondents say they have explicit images of themselves saved on their device<sup>1</sup>. This ranges from highs of 34% in 16-24 and 25-34 age groups, and drops to 8% of adults surveyed in the 55+ age group. Differences between gender groups are negligible.

- › A quarter (25%) of respondents have shared nude/explicit images of themselves with people they are either dating or chatting to<sup>1</sup>. Amongst 25-34-year-olds this number increased to 39% (the highest of all age groups).
- › 20% of respondents have explicit images of other people saved on their devices<sup>1</sup>, a number which increases to 30% and 29% for the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups respectively. Men surveyed across all age groups (25%) are more likely to have images of other people on their phones compared to women (17%).

The high number of images being captured, stored and shared correlates with the huge volume of people who have either survived or know someone who is a survivor of intimate image abuse. This suggests that although more people are prepared to store and share images, they are less cognisant of the potential consequences of sharing those intimate images of themselves.

- › Almost half (46%) of respondents globally are either a survivor of intimate image abuse (7%) or know someone – friend, ex-partner, social acquaintance, relative - who is a survivor of this form of abuse.

<sup>1</sup> 'I have experienced this more than once' and 'I have experienced this once' answers combined

- This number spikes significantly amongst younger generations with 69% of 16–24-year-olds surveyed having either survived intimate image abuse or know someone who is a survivor, and 64% for those between 25–34-years old.
- Given the high volumes of explicit images being shared, it is surprising – and perhaps telling – that only 21% of respondents who had shared an image then requested it be deleted from someone else's device.

There is a disconnect between respondents' belief that IIA should carry legal penalties and their feeling that it is the fault of the individuals for sharing an explicit image in the first place. AI and deepfakes have further muddied the water.

- 85% of respondents believe that sharing intimate images without consent should carry the same legal penalties as other severe privacy violations<sup>2</sup>.
- However, exactly half (50%) of respondents believe that if you've shared an image of yourself, it remains your fault if it ends up in the wrong hands<sup>3</sup>.
- A further 33% believe the advent of AI and deep fake images renders the issue meaningless as anything can be created and shared without consent.

### Intimate Image Abuse: a snapshot

As defined by the Revenge Porn Helpline, intimate image abuse or 'revenge porn', is the sharing of, taking or threatening to share private sexual images shared without consent. Anyone can be a victim of intimate image abuse, regardless of gender, sexuality and whether they are 18 or 80. In some cases, the content is shared in an act of revenge to embarrass, humiliate or cause distress to a person after the breakdown of a relationship, but it's not always about revenge.

Alice (not her real name) explained that her partner of 10 years had recently passed away after battling a long-term illness. During this time, Alice was his carer and was deeply affected by his loss. While coping with her grief, Alice began receiving direct messages on Instagram from unknown users suggesting that her nude pictures were online. Initially, Alice dismissed these as spam, believing there was no truth to them since she had never shared such images.

However, a month later, Alice received a message with a screenshot showing her full name on a porn site accompanied by a derogatory message. This revelation caused her significant distress, leading her to contact the Revenge Porn Helpline. The practitioner conducted a facial recognition search and found a number of intimate images of Alice shared across multiple sites. These images, which appeared to be voyeuristic, were taken while Alice was asleep or intoxicated, and Alice realized that her late partner was the likely source.

Alice's case was particularly challenging as she had to balance her grief with feelings of betrayal. Her primary concern was the potential impact on her children if these images were discovered by people they knew. The Helpline supported Alice by reporting the content for removal and conducting weekly check-ins. Over 4,000 images were reported, achieving a 90% removal rate. Alice credited the Helpline's support with helping her through this traumatic period, stating she might not have survived without their assistance.

**NORMALISATION:** The widespread use of smartphones has made the taking and sharing of intimate images a common practice. Advanced camera technology and instant messaging apps have facilitated this behaviour, particularly among younger generations. The rise of online dating and the use of ephemeral messaging services have further

2 'Yes, absolutely, it is just as harmful as other severe privacy violations', 'Yes, but only if there is clear intent to harm or harass the individual' and 'Yes, other, please specify' answers combined

3 'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' answers combined



normalised the sharing of such images, despite the inherent risks.

**CONSENT:** The issue of consent and ownership regarding intimate images is not straightforward, with many individuals assuming ownership of material that they have received, regardless of where it has come from and who has shared it. An underlying feeling that if someone has created an image of themselves and then shared it, then they are essentially to blame if something happens to it. This raises questions of 'victim blaming' where there is a belief that an individual could have taken (or not taken) actions to avoid experiencing abuse.

**GROWING RISK:** As sharing intimate images becomes more common, the risk of misuse, including voyeurism, cyber-flashing and revenge porn, increases. Once an image is shared, it can be challenging to control its distribution or ensure its deletion, leading to significant emotional and reputational harm. The ease of sharing explicit material through various platforms makes it easier for images to be spread without consent, emphasising the need for greater awareness of these dangers.

**PROTECTING PRIVACY:** Protecting privacy is crucial in the age of digital communication. Despite the normalisation of sharing intimate images, it is essential to understand that once shared, these images can be misused. To safeguard

privacy, individuals should be educated on secure technologies like encryption and cloud services. Parents can play a key role by having open discussions with their children about the risks and by using tools to monitor and restrict the sharing of sensitive content.

David Emm, Principal Security Researcher, Global Research and Analysis Team, Kaspersky, commented: "Privacy has become a very complicated and nuanced topic in this day and age. More than ever, it's important to be personally informed and educated to make choices with your eyes wide open. Sending and sharing content is a significant part of our digital culture in 2024, but knowing how and when to do so safely and understanding what to do if you change your mind is crucial."

When considering the safe sharing of intimate content, it's essential to stop and take a moment before pressing send. Consider whether you can really trust the person and understand how they will handle what you are entrusting them with. Reflect on how you would feel if the image got into the wrong hands and was seen by someone you didn't want to see it, and whether you still want to send the image. It's also important to send with caution by choosing an encrypted

platform with built-in safety measures, to ensure that it can only be seen by the person you're sending it to, and to explicitly inform the recipient that the content is for their eyes only, as you shouldn't assume they know that.

While there are many great support mechanisms and tools available to help remove unwanted images from online sites, it's essential to remember that once you press send, you lose control over that image, regardless of your express wishes. Similarly, if you find yourself in receipt of an image that shouldn't be shared, take a moment to consider how you treat it. What would you want someone to do if they received such an image of you by mistake [forward someone's bank details that you accidentally received?]"

## #1: The rise of intimate image storage devices

The proliferation of smartphones has significantly normalised the taking and sharing of intimate images, a phenomenon driven by the widespread availability of advanced camera technology and the convenience of instant messaging applications. According to the data, 25% of people surveyed globally have shared nude or explicit material of themselves with individuals they are dating or chatting with<sup>1</sup>.

Interestingly, while 25% globally report sharing intimate images, a higher percentage (34%) have received such material, indicating that some individuals may be serial senders<sup>1</sup>. This discrepancy also points to the use of messaging services like Snapchat, where users might mistakenly believe that images cannot be stored permanently.

The data also reveals regional differences in behaviour. Latin American countries, for instance, show higher rates of both sending (31%) and receiving (45%) explicit material compared to European countries. This disparity could be attributed to cultural differences and variations in legislative frameworks.

European nations have implemented robust laws against IIA, potentially curbing such activities. Indeed,

in the UK, the trend has shown a slight decrease from 32.5% in 2021 (following a previous Kaspersky [poll](#)) to 25% in 2024, suggesting an increasing awareness of the potential dangers associated with sharing explicit images potentially driven by the UK's leading position in terms of regulation against sharing images of this nature.

Age and gender also play significant roles. Half of individuals surveyed aged 16-24 have received explicit material from strangers, while 35% of those aged 25-34 have requested the deletion of their intimate images. Additionally, 40% of males surveyed have been shown or sent explicit images by third parties, compared to 34% of females.

The rise of intimate image sharing underscores the need for continued education and stringent legal protections to safeguard privacy and prevent misuse.

## #2: Consent and ownership rules remain unclear to most

The issue of consent and ownership regarding intimate images remains murky for many, largely due to the complexity and ambiguity surrounding these concepts in digital interactions. The data highlights significant gaps in understanding and behaviour when it comes to the ownership and sharing of explicit content.

Men are slightly less likely than women to seek consent before sharing intimate images (5.7% vs 4.01% respectively said that they don't specifically negotiate consent), and a notable 20% of males surveyed have sent nude images to individuals they have never met in real life<sup>1</sup>, 22% basing their actions on perceived trust within the relationship. Conversely, 12% of females have shared explicit images they have received with others for non-malicious reasons<sup>1</sup>, 27% guided by pre-established boundaries in their relationships.

Unfortunately, there is a visible gender gap in revenge porn, predominantly affecting women, similar to the trends we see in cyberstalking cases. Both forms of digital abuse violate privacy and promote harmful



**gender stereotypes. Addressing these issues requires a united effort from tech companies, governments, and NGOs to develop advanced detection technologies, implement legal protections, and provide comprehensive support systems for victims.”**  
**Maria Losyukova, ESG & Sustainability Lead, Kaspersky.**

Trust in the deletion of shared images is low. Only 67% of people trust others to delete intimate images upon request<sup>4</sup>, indicating a widespread scepticism about the permanence of digital content. This mistrust is more pronounced among women (62%) compared to men (73%), reflecting a gender disparity in confidence about digital consent and privacy.

Platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and email are the most common conduits for sharing explicit images. The preference for these channels underscores the ease and ubiquity of these platforms for private communication. Surprisingly, despite the rise of ephemeral messaging apps like Snapchat, email remains a more significant channel, highlighting how “traditional” means of communication persist in this context.

Roughly three in ten (27%) individuals believe that

receiving an intimate image confers ownership, further muddying the waters around consent. The difference between men and women is significant, standing at 30% versus 25% respectively. The advent of AI and deepfakes exacerbates this confusion, as many (33%) feel that the capability to create fake images diminishes the significance of ownership and consent, complicating the ethical landscape of intimate image sharing<sup>3</sup>.

**Sophie Mortimer, Revenge Porn Helpline manager at SWGfL, said: “consent must always be at the heart of responses to intimate image abuse: consent to create and share images, and an understanding that consent is ongoing, not a one time for all time. Unfortunately, abuse still happens but we will continue to work developing preventative tools such as StopNCII.org and the Revenge Porn Helpline will continue to be there to give support should things go wrong.”**

Encouragingly, 85% of all respondents think that sharing explicit images without consent should carry the same legal penalties as other severe privacy violations<sup>2</sup>. That said, a further 50% believe that if you’ve shared an image of yourself, it remains your

<sup>4</sup> ‘Completely trust’ and ‘Somewhat trust’ answers combined

fault if it ends up in the wrong hands<sup>3</sup>. This raises the question of whether people truly appreciate the severity of the issue or if there is an undercurrent of 'victim blaming'. Not everyone who engages in victim blaming explicitly accuses someone of failing to prevent what happened to them. Sometimes, in its more understated forms, people may not always realise that they're doing it.

### #3: The drivers for intimate image creation

The creation and sharing of intimate images is driven by various motivations. Many individuals share explicit material within the context of a romantic relationship or flirtatious interaction, viewing it as an expression of trust and intimacy. This is particularly common among younger age groups who have grown up in a digital world where sexting is normalised.

The data shows that 20% of males have sent nude images to someone they have never met in real life<sup>1</sup>, often based on the level of trust and nature of the relationship. Conversely, 12% of females have shared explicit images they received with others non-maliciously<sup>1</sup>, 27% of which who are guided by pre-established boundaries within their relationships.

However, not all sharing of intimate images is benign. A small but significant portion of individuals share such material with malicious intent. For instance, 8.4% of those surveyed who shared images did so for revenge, and 9.1% to frighten others.

#### AALIYA'S STORY

Aaliya (not her real name), a 22-year-old British-Pakistani woman, contacted the Revenge Porn Helpline after discovering that intimate images of her had been shared on an adult website by an ex-partner. These images, initially shared during their relationship, were distributed without her consent a year after their breakup. Aaliya's distress deepened as she found thousands of her images across various sites.

The Helpline conducted extensive searches to identify and report the images for removal, despite some websites being uncooperative. Weekly conversations with Aaliya revealed

significant impacts on her well-being; she struggled with attending university, eating, and socializing due to the fear of her family or community discovering the images. The Helpline encouraged Aaliya to seek additional support and advised her to stop searching for her images, assuring her they would handle it.

Although hesitant to involve law enforcement initially, Aaliya's concerns grew when she found social media profiles impersonating her and promoting the sale of her images. The Helpline, together with the Report Harmful Content service, managed to get these profiles removed quickly, despite new ones appearing frequently.

Thanks to their combined efforts, the Helpline successfully removed over 3,110 intimate images and 188 impersonation accounts. Aaliya's case highlighted the severe emotional and psychological toll such abuse can have and the crucial role of support services in managing and mitigating its impact.

This behaviour underscores a darker side of intimate image sharing, where personal content is weaponised to cause harm, intimidate, or humiliate. Additionally, the data reveals that 30% of men surveyed believe receiving an intimate image grants them ownership, complicating issues of consent and highlighting a prevalent misunderstanding about digital privacy and respect. This mixture of motivations illustrates the complex landscape of intimate image sharing, driven by both positive and negative intentions.

### #4: Forearmed is forewarned: best practice steps and partner guidance

Understanding the potential for intimate image abuse is crucial in a digital age where sharing intimate images has become normalised. Over two-thirds (68.68%) of 16-24-year-olds know someone who has been a victim of intimate image abuse, highlighting the prevalence of this issue among younger generations.

Once an image is shared, it is virtually impossible to fully control its spread or ensure its deletion. Despite

the normalisation of sharing nudes, it is vital to recognise that these images can be misused, leading to significant emotional and reputational harm.

**Sophie Mortimer, Revenge Porn Helpline manager at SWGfL, said: “we can see every day that intimate image abuse is a continuing problem, but this study shows us where we need to take action: building a national and international conversation about the meaning and importance of consent, improving online safety knowledge for adults and young people alike and making it clear that, when intimate image abuse happens, it is the perpetrators who are entirely at fault.”**

Being forewarned about these risks can help individuals make more informed decisions about their digital behaviour. For parents and guardians, it is important to educate and protect children from the dangers associated with sharing intimate images. Parents should:

- › **Discuss the risks:** Have open conversations about the potential consequences of sharing intimate images, including the possibility of them being shared without consent.
- › **Encourage trust and communication:** Make sure children feel comfortable discussing any online experiences or pressures they may face.
- › **Teach digital literacy:** Educate children about secure ways to use technology, including the importance of privacy settings and understanding that images shared online can be permanent.
- › **Use parental controls:** Implement tools and apps that monitor and restrict the sharing of sensitive content.
- › **Set clear rules:** Establish family guidelines for internet and phone use, emphasising respect for privacy and the importance of consent.
- › **Model responsible behaviour:** Show by example how to engage responsibly with technology and online sharing.

Technological advancements change social norms, and in the case of smartphones it has enabled and normalised an increase in misuse and abuse of intimate images. The data underscores the importance of being forewarned about these risks, as well as the need for robust legal protections and digital literacy education.

Individuals must be aware of the potential consequences of sharing intimate images and take proactive steps to safeguard their privacy. Parents, in particular, have a crucial role in guiding and protecting their children from the pitfalls of digital communication.

By fostering open conversations, teaching responsible digital behaviour, and using appropriate technological safeguards, we are better placed to navigate the complexities of this digital age.

#### **Advice for staying safe:**

- › Think before you post. Be mindful of who you share your data with and when. Always consider how the content you share online might be interpreted and used by others.
- › Understand which messengers are safe and which have end-to-end encryption
- › If you think you are a victim of IIA, keep evidence, and report it to the police and platforms where you believe your data is available
- › Always check the permission settings on the apps you use, to minimise the likelihood of your data being shared or stored by third parties – and beyond – without your knowledge
- › Use a reliable security solution like Kaspersky Password Manager to generate and secure unique passwords for every account; resist the temptation to reuse the same one
- › Utilise StopNCII.org, a global online tool to help protect intimate images from being shared online across some of the most widely used platforms across the world.



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