Remote Female Fixation
—A Grounded Theory on Semi-Illegal Sharing of Nude Imagery Online

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Abstract: In this article, we present the classic grounded theory of *remote female fixation*, which provides new knowledge on the illegal sharing of sexualized images of young girls in networked communities on the internet. This sharing occurs without consent and usually without the girls even knowing about it. In the study, we identified the main concern and action strategies of the anonymous users of a large online forum for the sharing of nude images. The data were gathered from 20 different online comment sections of the Norwegian branch of a global, anonymous community with a reputation for extensive sharing of nude images of young women. By carefully analyzing the data, we found that the forum's users had an ongoing need to master their own female fixations, which they satisfied through the process of remote female fixation. In this process, forum users engaged in the following four interdependent strategies: *continuous competition, loyalty-based inclusion, irregular rewarding,* and *tactical negotiation.* By identifying the forum users' shared concern, this theory may help explain the increasing presence of sexual abuse in digital environments.

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1. Introduction

Young women continuously experience different types of systematic, sexualized violence and abuse in cyberspace. In a report on women's rights and gender equality commissioned by the EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2018) it was shown that 20 percent of young women in the European Union have experienced cyber sexual harassment. The Nordic Gender Equality Fund noted that the sharing of non-consensual nude images occurs frequently and is a gendered problem with serious consequences for the affected individuals (KUN, 2017). According to data on non-consensual pornography among adults in the United States, higher rates of victimization and lower rates of perpetration had been reported for women than for men, underlining the fact that nude image sharing is a gendered sexual problem (RUVALCABA & EATON, 2020). [1]

Our inspection was inspired by the presence of conflicting or opposing views and actions on sexual harassment in the public sphere. In 2016, people in many countries began speaking out against sexual harassment through the international #MeToo movement. In the media, the unified public condemnation of harassment and violence against women was absolute. At the same time, the Norwegian authorities uncovered a massive international, digital network of pedophiles for sharing illegal images and videos of children on the internet. The global debate also brought to light several online and semi-illegal platforms for the sharing of nude images. The public disapproval of such behavior increased, and there were no opposing voices in the Norwegian public discourse. The image sharers themselves remained invisible, causing much speculation as to who they were, what their motivations might have been, and what their practices were. The aim of our study, in which we investigated the actual image sharers and their practices, was thus to contribute new knowledge to society's understanding of the people who share illicit images. [2]

Most research on digital criminal violations against women, both in the Norwegian and the international context, is focused on nude image sharing in relation to the victims and their experiences (RUVABALCA & EATON, 2020), definitions of revenge porn (STROUD, 2014), or legal and educational aspects to do with crime prevention and the criminalization of non-consensual image sharing (KINGE, 2017; KRIEGER, 2017; RØNNING, 2018; SKAVLAN & VISTE 2018; YAR & DREW, 2019). However, only in a few inquiries the perpetrators' motivations or actions had been investigated, which means that the people behind the nude image sharing remain largely unresearched. Research projects on forum users typically are concerned with the normative or moral perspectives of nude image sharing—for example, STROUD (2014) wrote about the "Growing Plague of Revenge Porn." [3]

Investigating non-consensual nude image sharing and its agents is both complex and controversial as well as ethically and methodically challenging. The many privacy issues involved in getting access to such a topic may partly explain why very few, if any, researchers have analyzed the practices of image sharers. In our approach we addressed this research gap by demonstrating how grounded

theory methodology (GTM) can be used to solve the problematic issues and avoid the ethical pitfalls that arise for researchers working with difficult, illegal, and unavailable research objects. [4]

First, we will elaborate on the methodological problems that we had to solve when exploring a sensitive topic (Section 2). Then, we will present the theory of remote female fixation (Section 3). Afterwards, we will discuss the theory in relation to existing literature and research (Section 4). Finally, we will present the implications and suggestions for further use of the developed theory (Section 5) before offering concluding remarks (Section 6). [5]

2. Data and Choice of Method

The object of this study was the Norwegian branch of a global, anonymous image-sharing forum. This forum was one of many anonymous online communities infamous for the illegal sharing of nude images of young women. Due to the hidden identities and the varying activity of the individual sharers, the total number of people who participated in the forum's activities was unknown. [6]

We soon realized that the issue of non-consensual nude image sharing on online forums posed significant problems in terms of the research object, process and method. As LEGEWIE and NASSAUER (2018) noted, international codes of research ethics urge scholars to conduct studies of illegal behavior that could benefit society, even if such studies involve ethical concerns. When not resulting in the avoidance of ethically problematic subjects, such ambiguous research guidelines create higher ethical standards for scientific projects. Because of the sensitive nature of our project, specific guidelines for privacy were needed for us to be able to conduct research on non-consensual image sharers online. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), which assesses whether a research project meets the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as described in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [7]

To successfully conduct a research project that could harm or expose vulnerable individuals, users, or third parties, personal or individual data cannot be processed in any way (NORWEGIAN NATIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEES, 2016). From a research perspective, the easiest way to do it with an adequate level of protection for both victims and participants was to analyze the users' online communication with each other, without performing qualitative interviews with the users and without saving any personal data or identifiable information. In this way, the investigation could take place without needing further approval from the NSD. Due to the privacy requirements, the criteria for gathering the data were limited to the communications of the online forum itself, leading to an analysis of 20 different discussions between users. [8]

We chose classic GTM (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967) because it allowed us to explore and capture the practices and strategies of the users who share nude images online. GTM allowed protecting both the victims and the participants and

provided a detailed and specific methodological approach and tools. Classic GTM was applied as the methodology's "all is data" approach (GLASER 2001, 2002) allows the researcher to investigate human interactions and behavioral patterns in otherwise inaccessible substantive areas. Even if little was known about the forum's users, the method allowed us to analyze the users' problems and processes by constantly comparing documents in the form of message exchanges and posts on the online forum. Therefore, GTM worked well for observing the forum users' communication and actions at a distance, effectively dismissing any need for conducting qualitative interviews with the research subjects. The users operated beyond the public sphere for various reasons, and when a researcher enters their realm, there arises the possibility of offending or scaring off the subjects. As PAWELZ (2017) wrote, when studying hard-to-reach populations, cultural differences with and possible distrust of the researchers have a direct impact on the choice of methods. In conflictual cases, using an observational approach can be the best choice. According to NØRSKOV and RASK (2011), the most desirable scenario for collecting data in an online community would involve the researcher as a "complete observer" (§4). When the researcher acts as what NØRSKOV and RASK termed a complete observer, the possibility of influencing the community is avoided, which, in turn, can strengthen the dependability of the analysis. [9]

GTM made it possible to conceptualize behavioral patterns while simultaneously securing an openness to the material by avoiding existing hypotheses on and ethical or moral assessments of the users' actions. As the co-originator of GTM Barney GLASER put it, "The emphasis is on behavioral patterns, not personal patterns" (1978, p.69). The users' illegal activities on the forum were ethically challenging to follow and made it extremely important to analyze the data on neutral grounds. GTM ensured that the users' actions were the main focus when performing the analysis, minimizing personal, social, and cultural convictions and biases. [10]

To satisfy both the ethical and the data protection requirements, the research design excluded interviews with forum users. No personal data or identifying information was processed in any way; instead, data collection was limited to the messages posted publicly on the online forum. Ethical and data protection requirements also precluded a research design involving rich description because of the risk of unwittingly including identifying information. The ethical and privacy requirements demanded that we select a research method that would enable analyzing the forum posts while protecting the forum users and the individuals captured and exposed in the images. As the conceptualizations provided by grounded theories are abstract of time, place, and people (GLASER, 1978, 1998, 2002; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967), no specific person can be identified from the theory developed. [11]

Furthermore, given the lack of relevant literature, it was important that the chosen approach would enable bringing to light users' issues and processes. The classic GTM (e.g., GLASER, 1998, 2001, 2002) satisfies this requirement because, as an inductive-deductive method, it was designed to understand the main concern

of the participants of a substantive area and how these concerns are resolved or processed. The research procedures that focus on conceptualizing behavior patterns in the substantive area—rather than the personal patterns of participants (GLASER, 1978, 2001, 2002)—minimize the role of social and cultural convictions by focusing the analysis on what the subjects are actually doing. [12]

2.1 Data collection

The data were collected by following 20 different topics on the discussion board of the Norwegian branch of the global image-sharing forum. The discussion threads, which received posts from more than 100 participants, were studied over a period of eight months and analyzed in accordance with the tenets of GTM. The data collection was limited to the posts provided by the forum's active users. The only inclusion criterion for selecting a discussion was the users' Norwegian origin. Each thread was of a different length, had a different mix of participants, and involved different types of content. The number of images shared in each post ranged from two to several dozens. The individual comments on the images varied greatly in terms of length, from single words or short phrases to lengthy discussions. The active participants appeared to be based in the Norwegian cities of Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Stavanger. The forum's passive users could not be analyzed due to the absence of posts. Therefore, the number of inactive or passive users is not known. Data were mainly captured via field notes, including observational notes on a user's messages and how they related to the accompanying images; known as "baseline" data, such untreated and easily available material conveys spontaneous reactions (GYNNILD, 2014). [13]

As pointed out by GLASER and STRAUSS (1967), GTM's data collection aims to reveal as many traits and nuances in the material as possible. In accordance with GTM procedures, the data collection was substantial in the beginning and naturally decreased with continuous collection as analysis progressed and no new variables or attributes emerged. After 16 discussion threads had been analyzed, almost no new traits emerged in the material. In retrospect, the data collection was less demanding than the ongoing analysis. To avoid the researchers being overwhelmed in the process, the data were collected in short intervals over a long period of time. This created a distance from the data, supporting the research efforts to remain objective and alert to the nuances of the data being analyzed. [14]

2.2 Data analysis

The classic GTM is powerful because it enables researchers to retain control in a chaotic research environment and to successfully provide new knowledge. When developing the grounded theory of remote female fixation, we followed the tenets of classic GTM by constantly alternating between the different stages of the process—that is, between systematic data collection, analysis of the material, and the development of conceptual categories, properties, and dimensions and the write-up. This carefully constructed approach to managing the data was crucial to succeed at building a new theory. The switching between the steps of open and selective coding, memoing, sorting, and theoretical sampling allowed new insights to emerge during theory development. Writing memos helped capture what GLASER (1978, p.83) called "the frontier of the analyst's thinking." Memo-writing also enabled easy access to the different phases of classic GTM during the demanding and time-consuming analysis, which GLASER (1998, p.225) referred to as a "delayed action phenomenon." It took time to lift the descriptions of the users' actions to an abstract, theoretical level. Throughout the research process, we found it helpful to reread the grounded theory literature to make sure that the theory in development was in line with classical GTM procedures. [15]

During the open coding stage, the material was read line by line. Each incident noticed in the data was compared, conceptualized, and assigned a code. Clusters of incidents sharing common traits and attributes coalesced, and the codes grew into concepts. This process of constant comparison eventually illuminated the forum's users' main concern and marked the start of theoretical sampling and the selective coding stage. As the analysis progressed, the data relevant to the core category were highlighted by removing the material that was less relevant to how the subjects resolved their concern. The remaining concepts were sorted according to the categories and their constitutive properties, which eventually led to theoretical saturation and a fully grounded theory of remote female fixation. [16]

3. The Theory of Remote Female Fixation

The main concern of the anonymous forum users is to manage, control, and negotiate their distant fixation on female nudity. To process their main concern, the users anonymously engage in collective sharing activities online. However, as users participate in the nude-image-sharing forum, their focus on women intensifies, as does their need to process their fixation. The anonymous nude-image-sharing behavior thus reinforces the users' fixation, creating what seems to be an endless game, where the only solution is to share more images. The options for handling the dependency remotely, via online means, are crucial to keeping the game going and reveal what would otherwise go on in real life, namely peeping. [17]

The core category of remote female fixation shows that nude image sharing resembles a continuous virtual game consisting of four game strategies that the users *must* apply in order to play. These strategies are *constant competition,*

loyalty-based inclusion, irregular rewarding, and *tactical negotiation*. These mutually dependent strategies ensure the continuous distribution of nude images on the online forum and are crucial for users to participate in the game. A user's action in the game immediately creates the need for further action. In this way, the game is perpetual and structured by the underlying causes and consequences that the participation in the game creates. A user's action creates a set of circumstances, which, in turn, entangle all users in a behavioral pattern and maintain the use of the different strategies for image sharing. [18]

3.1 Strategy 1: Constant competition

Most online games consist of two or more players competing in some way. However, constant competition focuses on the tasks that the users must engage in when playing the image-sharing game. Users work collectively to solve tasks, with varying results. The strategy of constant competition comprises the following five behavior elements: *collective chasing*, *sexualized networking, capitalizing, winning,* and *continuous play*. Together, these elements ensure the game's endless nature: the completion of a task results in a new task, once more bringing the user back to the game's entry level. This strategy means that the game is constant, endless, and only restricted by the users themselves. [19]

3.1.1 Collective chasing

The purpose of the image-sharing forum is to share nude imagery, and, from the start, the users unite to find and make nude images available for sharing. Forum users share information about where to find photos of girls on social media, and the more players there are, the easier the hunt, which, in turn, provides faster and better results for the individual player. Working together in this way guarantees the kind of result for each user that would be difficult to achieve for the lone ranger. Collective chasing is made possible through user anonymity, which disconnects the user from their public identity. [20]

3.1.2 Sexualized networking

As the users work collectively to achieve their goals, networks of forum users are established. The greater the quality or the quantity of images that a player has, the more in demand the player will be, whereas players with fewer images will be automatically positioned as less attractive. The strategy of sexualized networking is thus conditioned by a user's image capital and by intra-user relations that are mutually rewarding. Building a quality network helps a user to gain access to other networks with more exclusive images, granting access to more exclusive forums, websites, and conversations that are password protected. For instance, a user is often asked to share nude images to confirm their value before being invited to more secure forums or platforms. In the comments section, the players who cannot prove themselves as valuable often beg to be accepted. [21]

3.1.3 Capitalizing nudes

Nude images are the forum's currency. To capitalizing the images, it is crucial that individual users join or expand networks and engage in image sharing. The primary means of increasing one's nude image capital is to have a lot of pictures, as image quality is subordinate to quantity. At the same time, the users favor fresh pictures of girls whose images have not been previously shared: the newer the images, the more valuable the capital. This exchange mechanism distinguishes anonymous nude image sharing from traditional pornography consumption, showing that the users' goal is to "undress" the women who are not already nude. Only by sharing private images of ordinary girls can the users achieve the goal of expanding the network. [22]

3.1.4 Winning

The competition reaches its climax when the nude image is posted. In traditional games, victory consists of defeating an opponent or succeeding at a challenge. In this game, triumph is reflected in the terms with which users claim a win or conquer a position in relation to both the pictured girls and other players. The moment of climax is referred to using terms like "score," "wins," or "winning" in the comment section. Winning can only be achieved by active players and is associated with intense feelings of joy and a sense of community. These feelings are heightened by the quantity or quality of the nude images. The positive feelings experienced by the users are evidenced by the greatly increased number of comments after winning, all expressing triumph. [23]

3.1.5 Continuous play

The rapid pace of life in the digital sphere makes competing in the game time dependent. Continuous play requires the player to be present on the forum at all times in order to gather images and compete in the game. As the images themselves are non-consensual and illegal there is always external pressure from public institutions, such as the police or the news media, to remove the images posted on the forum. The users are aware that the images can disappear at any time, which makes ongoing participation crucial. The fear of missing out on important events, such as the sharing of prestigious images, is a constant trigger to the players. The fear of missing out can be real or imagined but is a persistent characteristic in terms of players' experiences of and motivations for participating in the game. [24]

3.2 Strategy 2: Loyalty-based inclusion

The second game strategy, loyalty-based inclusion relates to cooperation and partnership in obtaining and sharing nude images. The tacit contract between players must be maintained as each player is dependent on the other players. Different players can have varying interests, but loyalty-based inclusion requires each player to consider every team player's interest and to collect images to satisfy each interest. For instance, a player may provide a post on the forum stating that he is interested in girls born in 2002, from a specific town, preferably blonds. Another player might only be interested in what he describes as girls that appear perfect in social situations and are not expected to have nudes at all. Others might only be interested in the people they know personally. If the loyalty contract is broken, each player's situation worsens, and consistently ignoring the needs of others can eventually lead to exclusion from the network. Loyalty-based inclusion involves the following strategies: *sharing is caring, active demanding, image harvesting, image hoarding,* and *dynamic dispersal.* [25]

3.2.1 Sharing is caring

Loyalty-based inclusion means that the users have accepted the satisfaction of other players' interests as being part of the game. This general attitude of sharing is caring impacts how the users communicate with each other and also influences the image sharing: when users share images, they care for each other. By caring about other players' interests, they reinforce an image-sharing culture whereby other players reciprocate the sharing, thus helping one another to process their main concern. For instance, when commenting on other users' posts, the users themselves use the term "sharing is caring" and tell others to share more. However, the main function of the care aspect, rather than being an affectionate or loving gesture, is to promote the sharing economy on the forum. Each player has to take responsibility and post images to maintain a steady flow of images. [26]

3.2.2 Active demanding

The pattern of active demanding rests on loyalty-based inclusion ensuring that players comply with the needs of others. The users actively encourage the sharing of images and demand material from one another, taking advantage of the established frame of sharing is caring. In every comment section, users reinforce the message that all users must share images for everyone to acquire images and that this is a precondition for sexualized networking. Active demanding keeps the nude-image-sharing machinery alive. The active demanding of images is accepted by all users and is therefore a legitimate action. [27]

3.2.3 Image harvesting

The loyalty-based inclusion combined with the pressure generated by actively demanding images from each other result in changed image interests for the individual player. To continue participating in the game, the players gather images that depart from their own interests. At this point, all nude images become relevant to the player, and users gather images that please others as well as themselves; in other words, players engage in image harvesting. [28]

3.2.4 Image hoarding

Image hoarding increases a player's image capital. The rule of loyalty-based inclusion creates the need to acquire content to share. Supplying images to satisfy image demanding and the needs of others is only viable if users acquire and keep images. Image hoarding happens continuously during the game to satisfy one's own needs and those of the teammates. Such image solidarity ensures the width and scope of the gathered images, including every posted photo in the users' library of nudes. As the nude images are key to creating networks that lead to further expansion of a player's library, some users have rich and substantial collections. Some players noted that they had hoarded images over several years and from different countries, which increased the value of their image capital. [29]

3.2.5 Dynamic dispersal

The last crucial characteristic of loyalty-based inclusion is the active and dynamic dispersal of images by each player. An established game requires users to share any material that might be of interest to as many players as possible. Dynamic dispersal explains why online images of nudes never disappear: the picture is published, saved repeatedly, and shared by several users on different networks, a process that continuously brings old photographs to life. [30]

3.3 Strategy 3: Irregular rewarding

The anonymous collective sharing of nude images has mixed outcomes for the users, resulting in irregular rewarding. When the competition is at its climax, the users can reap the rewards of the gaming situation. This situation is often described as a positive outcome, increasing the users' image capital and creating unity and affiliation. At the same time, lack of participation can generate negative responses toward less active users, ranging from offensive comments by fellow users to exclusion from the forum and other channels as well. This dynamic is important because the users operate between these extremes of positivity and negativity. An imbalance can be seen as a persistent state of stress that the less active users wish to resolve to boost their participation in the game. Irregular rewarding is composed of *collective correction, the disarming of women, emotional compensation* and *short-term profit.* [31]

3.3.1 Collective correction

The first dimension of irregular rewarding is visible in the collective and unified treatment of those players who do not adhere to the rules. The users refer to themselves as "fam," which is short for family, drawing on the traditional understanding of shared family values and interests. By operating as a collective, the users create affiliation through shared action, an important aspect for the survival of all human life. This feeling of belonging is strongly experienced by the individuals who struggle economically, mentally, or socially or feel marginalized due to their interests. For the forum users, the collective becomes highly important and users strive to participate and correct and remind one another of the importance of sharing nudes. The users who do not engage in the collective correction are barred from participation: for the suspended users, the rewards of game vanish, leaving them alone and unable to feed their fixation. Therefore, the users strive to participate and correct and remind each other of the importance of sharing nudes. The collective correction of behavior ensures that the sharing of images is maintained and simultaneously punishes users' lack of action. In this way, the collective correction of behavior regulates the quantity of the images posted. It also regulates the type of content shared—for example, by shutting down the users who post pictures of men and restating that the purpose of the forum is for nudes of young women only. [32]

3.3.2 The disarming of women

The forum users' need to disarm women and to strip them of their real-life power over the users underpins the behavior of irregular rewarding. The data showed that the forum users did not care for the standard, readily available pornographic images. Rather, the images shared by users are often low-quality images of private individuals in personal situations and do not always depict sexual intimacy. Possessing the nude images themselves is not enough for the players; they also need to be able to identify the pictured individuals. For instance, when a picture is posted for the first time, they ask who, how old, relationship status, and other personal information about the woman in the image. Users also start by posting a woman's name, hometown, age, and occupation so that other players can find her photos. What is central to the forum users is the possibility of undressing the women that they encounter in their daily lives and in society as a whole. The nude image becomes the object with which the users can acquire a sense of power; for the users, the depicted girls are associated with powerlessness. This is evidenced by the comments in which the users share intimate details about the women—for instance, saying that this woman has been a slut for several years and sharing stories from her life and laughing at them. [33]

However, the sharing of nude images does not subordinate the girls to the players in real life, as most often the players want the girls to remain unaware that their images are being distributed. As the power is not visibly exercised in relation to the women, the disarming of women is limited to the users' own understanding of the situation on the forum. For the players, the power struggle is an internal battle to control their female fixation. The disarming of women enables

the users to experience dominance and to refuse the experience of being subordinated to other players. In this way, the disarming of women shows how inextricably intertwined the female "body" becomes with female fixation. [34]

3.3.3 Emotional compensation

Emotional compensation is another important dimension of irregular rewarding when playing the nude image game. The game enables players to not only modify their current emotions but to experience a broad range of emotions. Active participation can result in experiencing both positive and negative emotions: when players "win," they can experience positive emotions, such as happiness, cleansing, a sense of achievement, and a sense of belonging; however, when players fail to achieve their goals, they experience more negative emotion. Players also experience a heightened sense of anticipation prior to, during, and after playing: the tension that is inherent in the uncertainty of image sharing can be alluring and motivate further participation. Importantly, the game offers the possibility to change or compensate for the emotions that a player feels. Both negative and positive emotions are strong motivators for action. The users can experience more of the desired emotions and change the unwanted ones. Furthermore, this means that different emotions can be a motivation for participating in the sharing of nudes. Therefore, the game enables emotional compensation that is independent of the users' varying initial emotions. [35]

3.3.4 Short-term profit

The competitive nature and rapid pace of the game make the potential emotional outcome of playing short-lived. The users must participate constantly, victory is transient, the hunt for more images is ongoing, and the users constantly risk exclusion. As the users rely on the external tool of nude image sharing to master their female fixation instead of developing an internal cognitive tool, the game demands constant repetition to enable short-term profit. The users must continue to share nudes to manage their remote female fixation, which makes the game never-ending. The users' short-term profit thus creates the perpetual need for the users' constant participation to process their distant female fixation. [36]

3.4 Strategy 4: Tactical negotiations

A tactical negotiation is the negotiation between the users' interests and the consequences of acting upon them. In the game, the players are constantly evaluating what is going on as part of tactically negotiating the room in which they operate. Participation demands that the users accept each other and deconstruct the norms present in society. This is crucial as it allows boundless expression that goes against public discourse. Tactical negotiations are thus intended to ensure a safe and stable environment for the sharing of non-consensual nude images and comprise *risk calculation, interest legitimization, boundary extension,* and *freedom of expression.* [37]

3.4.1 Risk calculation

Risk calculation involves users assessing the likelihood of being "caught" and making other participants aware of the various dangers involved in the activities. The risk of being exposed or punished for criminal actions lessens with each feature that enables safe participation. For example, anonymity is a key protection mechanism. Therefore, the degree and type of illegal material increase as users become more protected, which helps explain why the data studied is mainly considered to be in the "grey" area, with some of it illegal and some legal. After risk calculation, the users share images that cannot lead to severe punishment or imprisonment. The users depend on their combined efforts to remove the pictures of minors from the forum and from personal libraries to keep the forum away from the authorities' attention, thus securing future image sharing. Consequently, learning about the risks and avoiding the public's attention is an important part of the game. Risk calculation also impacts image hoarding because there is always a chance that the images will be removed due to external pressure. [38]

3.4.2 Interest legitimization

For users to reach their goals, each user has to accept the needs of all other users and their respective image projects. This is achieved through advocacy and acceptance of different values. The players do not judge each other's actions nor ask for the reasons why nude images of a specific type are shared. This absence of judgment makes it possible for the individual users to express their interests, no matter what these interests may be. In this way, the players use each other to legitimize their projects, with each user being accepted and, in turn, accepting other players and their interests, which reinforces the sense of community. For instance, the only occasion when some users told another user to stop posting images involved the images of a boy. The users told the person posting them that they had respected said user's needs for a long time but that the other users could not relate to that specific project. They kindly asked him to stop and restated that women were the main target. The forum users knew that the content being shared was unlawful. However, within their community, non-consensual nude image sharing is not regarded as a serious infringement but as a legitimate way to process the users' female fixation. [39]

3.4.3 Boundary extension

Compared to the traditional public sphere, the limits on the publication and deliberation of images within the network are almost nonexistent. Risk calculation seems to be the only means of setting limits for user behaviors. The users accept almost all content, with the exception of images of minors, so long as the users will not be caught. Between risk calculation and interest legitimization, the users expand the boundaries for action, thus ensuring the diversity of the posted material. Collective boundary extension exposes all users to a wide range of content, ranging from innocent to illegal. The moral standards associated with the ordinary public are discarded. As forum users engage in continuous efforts of

boundary extension and interest legitimization, they become exposed to more and more challenging material, potentially fueling their female fixation. [40]

Boundary extension may also impact a user's ability to empathize with the depicted girls. Moreover, displaying empathy for the depicted girls could be harmful to their own participation—for example, when participants discuss nude imagery, they typically focus on the negative stereotypes of women, applying derogatory terms such as "bitches," "whores," or "trash." [41]

3.4.2 Freedom of expression

Tactical negotiations and risk calculation create a sphere in which the users can express themselves freely. The players can enact the parts of themselves that are not accepted by society. In this way, the forum offers the possibility of developing a character and interests that are not accepted in public. This freedom of expression allows a diversity of discourse and interests, creating a place where the only limit for speech is that there is no limit. The forum becomes a safe place in which the users can communicate by using alternative expressions to those found in public discourse, thus creating an arena for deliberation. [42]

4. Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate the individuals who share non-consensual nude images online. The theory on remote female fixation that was developed contributes to our understanding of the issue by exploring patterns of human behavior. By conceptualizing the four strategies of constant competition, loyalty-based inclusion, irregular rewarding, and tactical negotiations, the theory illuminates the users' collective actions and shows why sexualized image sharing is a persistent and potentially growing social problem. Following the tenets of classic GTM we proposed the theory of remote female fixation based on the careful analysis of the data collected during the research process. As the theory is empirically derived, it reflects and explains what happens in the field; due to systematic and rigorous coding and concept development, the categories fit the data: "Grounded theory arrives at relevance, because it allows core problems and processes to emerge" (GLASER, 1978, p.5). By letting the data lead the way, without pressure from external or existing theories, we explained the users' main concern and how the concern is processed. Data-led methods are the most effective way of achieving relevance or validity when applying the classic GTM. [43]

The theory of remote female fixation challenges existing literature and research in psychology and the social sciences. The theory also shows how identifying patterns of behavior rather than the effects of individual actions produces important knowledge that cannot be achieved by other means. The first relevant aspect of our theory involves the definition of non-consensual nude image sharing. Nude image sharing is mainly associated with what STROUD (2014, p.168) described as "the intentional embarrassment of identifiable individuals through posting of nude images online," known as revenge porn. Revenge porn is a widely used colloquial term that frames an individual's actions as motivated by

hate or revenge, reducing their motivations and experience to those defined by existing moral assessments. By using grounded theory as a research method and, therefore, refraining from employing established terms and norms, we showed that the individuals' involved in nude image sharing experienced a whole spectrum of emotions that were distinct from revenge. By participating in the game of nude image sharing, the users could achieve different meaningful emotional states, such as joy, belonging, and a sense of achievement. The theory of remote female fixation reveals a complexity of user emotions and actions that so far have been absent in public discourse but are vital for the understanding of semi-illegal image sharing. [44]

The theory of remote female fixation relates not only to existing literature on nude image sharing (RUVALCABA & EATON, 2020), revenge porn (STROUD, 2014), and educational studies on criminalization and non-consensual image sharing (KINGE, 2017; KRIEGER, 2017; RØNNING, 2018; SKAVLAN & VISTE 2018; YAR & DREW, 2019) but also to literature on game theory and addiction. Game theory supports the underlying logic that shows how the players interact strategically in the image-sharing game and how punishments and rewards can affect their actions (SYVERTSEN, 2016). Theories on addiction show that human motivational systems function to promote and control actions. WEST (2006) applied an understanding of addiction as having an abnormal focus and priority on a specific action. Following the theory of remote female fixation, the way the users process their female fixation is not in itself a sign of addiction; however, the categories and strategies the users apply may increase the possibility of developing an addiction. The structural processes that influence how addictive a game can become include the pace of the game, the frequency of interactions and rewards, players' involvement, and the possibility of profit (OVERÅ & WEIHE, 2016; SKINNER, 1963). The theory of remote female fixation shows that all these characteristics were present when the users shared non-consensual nude images. [45]

It is also interesting to view the theory of remote female fixation in the context of counterpublics as elaborated by FRASER (2010). According to FRASER, counterpublics are alternative discursive arenas that exist in parallel to the established public spheres. FRASER suggested that stratified societies generate and structure social groups by means of a system of dominance and submission in the public sphere. The norm-based mechanisms of exclusion lead to the creation of counterpublics, in which subordinate groups can express oppositional or alternate identities, needs, or interests (ibid.). In regard to the theory of remote female fixation, the counterpublic that arises is explicitly anti-egalitarian, oppresses women, and is legally punishable, but the deliberative practice is, nonetheless, interesting. The theory shows that the users have created a safe space where all participants are accepted as long as they follow the established rules of the game. Neither disagreements nor emotions limited the deliberative practice as the users continued to rationally process their main concern together. The users established a counterpublic that assured freedom of speech, approaching the ideals of deliberation: a rational and open debate. In this way, the theory of remote female fixation also criticizes the function of the public

sphere rather than the users themselves. The boundaries of the public sphere might be perceived as excluding citizens who do not conform to established norms of behavior. Therefore, the public sphere might prompt individuals to search for or establish alternative discursive arenas. The forum we studied was closed by the authorities towards the end of the research process, after several years of failed attempts to intervene. [46]

5. Implications for Practice

The dissemination of non-consensual nude images of young girls on anonymous online forums is a challenge for the modern digital society. Authorities face significant challenges in preventing the online sharing of non-consensual nude images and punishing the perpetrators. The theory of remote female fixation provides insights into the shadowy users who share nude images: the theory explains patterns of behavior shaped by the strategies that the users apply to process their main concern, providing valuable knowledge to those who wish to understand how and why the forum users acted the way they did. The theory further shows how nude images are disseminated and explains image hoarding and the creation of sexualized networks. The theory provides important insights into the users' personal gain and the emotional impact that an online forum for nude image sharing might have on its participants. [47]

Furthermore, the theory of remote female fixation can be a tool to understand the complex and persistent nature of nude image sharing online. The theory may be useful to anyone working in the health, justice, or media professions. It has relevance for educational institutions wishing to increase the awareness of semi-illegal online activities among children, young adults, and professionals. By understanding those who share non-consensual nude images online it may be possible to facilitate an approach to the image-sharing issue in a viable way. The theory demonstrates the importance of studying people's behavior rather than their interpreted experience and contributes to the evidence that classic GTM is suitable for handling a sensitive research topic. For the general public, the theory provides a perspective that focuses on action rather than moral convictions. [48]

6. Concluding Remarks

The theory of remote female fixation sheds light on a controversial issue in the new, digital environments that arise on the margins of traditional public discourse arenas. The theory indicates evolving movements in society regarding gender, sexuality, and equality that the dominant public has excluded or suppressed rather than deliberated. [49]

When society deems certain voices as inherently wrong and criminalizes them, this can lead to the creation of anti-egalitarian counterpublics. These spaces that grow in the dark are seeded in the dysfunctional aspects of the experienced, uniform public sphere. In reality, the public contains more voices than what is presented in the media or elsewhere. By improving our understanding of what

happens in the shadows of the public sphere, the theory of remote female fixation sheds new light on the hidden cultural conditions to do with gender in society. [50]

Acknowledgments

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