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From myth to reality: sexual image abuse myth acceptance, the Dark Tetrad, and non-consensual intimate image dissemination proclivity

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ABSTRACT

Despite media attention on non-consensual intimate image dissemination (NCII), the literature on the personality traits, attitudes, and beliefs that predict NCII approval, enjoyment, and perpetration is limited. With a sample of 810 undergraduate students, we examined the relationship between dark personality traits, acceptance of image-based sexual abuse-related myths, and NCII. We found that 48.2% of our participants did not oppose NCII perpetration, 71.4% did not oppose NCII enjoyment, and 97.8% did not oppose NCII approval. Moreover, we found that being a man, heterosexual, and scoring higher in dark personality traits predicted acceptance of Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)-related myths. In turn, accepting such myths predicted not opposing NCII proclivity. Our results underscore the importance of demystifying technology-facilitated sexual violence and promoting educational material that highlights lived experience and dispelling IBSA-related myths.

PRACTICAL IMPACT STATEMENT:

This article may assist educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in designing strategies for the prevention of non-consensual intimate image dissemination (NCII) perpetration by explaining how acceptance of image-based sexual abuse myths, personality traits, and demographic characteristics are related to the willingness to accept, enjoy, or engage in NCII perpetration.

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It has been estimated that as many as 1 in 2 young adults engage in sexting, i.e. the consensual exchange of sexual material, such as nude or sexual images, videos, or text messages, using media devices (Mori et al., 2020). Recent research also reports a wide range of positive outcomes, including sexual pleasure and relationship benefits associated with sexting (Graham Holmes et al., 2021). However, this does not mean that sexting is without risks, as it could leave the sender of a nude or sexual image vulnerable to future victimisation in the form of non-consensual intimate image dissemination (NCII; McGlynn et al., 2017), a type of Image-Based Sexual Abuse, which refers to the non-consensual creation, distribution, or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images (IBSA; Henry & Powell, 2018). In fact, in a sample of young adults, approximately 1 in 5 reported they had shown or shared with another person a sext they were sent (Clancy et al., 2019), while in a different study that also employed a sample of young adults, researchers similarly found that approximately 1 in 5 participants had been forwarded NCII material (Clancy et al., 2020). In a large, international sample of adults, 1 in 3 participants had experienced someone take, distribute, or threaten to distribute their nude or sexual image without their consent (Powell et al., 2020).

Moreover, work on NCII is now more timely than ever, as the Australian eSafety Commissioner found a 210% increase on the average weekly number of NCII reports during the COVID-19 lockdown period, between March and May of 2020 (Powell & Flynn, 2020).

The impact of NCII on the victim can be devastating, including but not limited to feelings of shame, trouble trusting others, and becoming socially isolated (Bates, 2017; Flynn et al., 2016; McGlynn et al., 2020). Additionally, NCII victims have reported that their career and mental health were negatively impacted in direct response to their victimisation (Bates, 2017; McGlynn et al., 2020; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Alarming, policy offers limited recourse to IBSA victims (Henry, Flynn, et al., 2018; Karasavva & Noorbhai, 2021). To date, there have been multiple notable cases where victims died from suicide following the dissemination of their nude or sexual image without their consent (McGlynn & Rackley, 2016). Bates (2017) shared the story of one woman who experienced post-traumatic stress disorder afterward: *"I felt so hopeless and so helpless... Someone else had defined my destiny"* (p. 31). Given the gravity of NCII and its immense negative impact on the victim, research on the attitudes that promote or excuse NCII is crucial and a first step in understanding ways to combat NCII.

NCII perpetrators are not limited to current or past romantic or sexual partners, as friends and acquaintances, family members, or persons the victim does not personally know may choose to share the victim's image (Henry, Powell, et al., 2018; Karasavva & Forth, 2021). The images may then be distributed widely both via websites dedicated to NCII-related content and private channels, such as mobile phone messaging and emails (Henry & Flynn, 2019; McGlynn et al., 2017). Alarming, there is a booming and lucrative industry for websites hosting NCII material (Henry & Flynn, 2019). The readily available and continuing supply of NCII material also suggests that there is demand for it (Henry & Flynn, 2019). However, not all visitors of NCII websites are necessarily NCII perpetrators, which implies that there is a subset of the population that may approve and enjoy NCII material, and might have a proclivity, i.e. a tendency or propensity to engage in it themselves, should they be given the right opportunity, for example following the breakdown of a relationship and given that they possess nude or sexual images of their ex-partner (Henry & Flynn, 2019).

Dark Tetrad

Certain personality traits may influence an individual's proclivity and enjoyment of NCII or how readily they accept myths related to NCII. For this study, we focused on the Dark Tetrad personality traits (sadism, psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism; Buckels et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These subclinical personality traits each have distinct characteristics, with a few key common features, including social manipulation, aggressiveness, and placing their personal interests above others (Buckels et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Past studies have found an association between dark traits and sexual harassment proclivity, and a higher likelihood of perpetrating sexual violence (Russell & King, 2016; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016). Further, studies have found a positive association between dark personality traits and rape myth acceptance, as well as with prejudicial evaluations about women and gender role beliefs, such as dehumanising women and highly valuing men being dominant (Boland, 2018; DeLisle et al., 2019; Methot-Jones et al., 2019; Preston et al., 2018).

To date, it is unclear if and how the dark personality traits are associated with the proclivity to engage in non-consensual dissemination of sexual messages and images. Clancy and colleagues (2019) found that higher endorsement of Dark Triad traits was linked with a higher likelihood of engaging in sext dissemination. When examining proclivity to engage in NCII perpetration, Pina and colleagues (2017) found that except for sadism, the Dark Tetrad was associated with higher likelihood of not opposing NCII perpetration. Finally, both narcissism and Machiavellianism were positively correlated with finding NCII exciting or amusing but, when examined further, only narcissism independently predicted such feelings (Pina et al., 2017). These results relating the Dark Tetrad and the proclivity to engage in NCII perpetration were recently replicated in a community sample of

adults, where Machiavellianism and psychopathy were found to predict proclivity to engage in NCII perpetration, while narcissism was predictive of greater feelings of amusement and excitement towards NCII (Pina et al., 2021).

Myth acceptance

Another reason why individuals may engage or have a proclivity to engage in sexually abusive behaviours, including the proclivity to engage in NCII, is holding false beliefs and accepting myths related to NCII (Henry, Flynn, et al., 2018). According to social cognitive theory, when confronted with a malicious act that goes directly against internalised moral standards, individuals may employ cognitive processes that allow them to transform it into something less morally reprehensible (Bandura, 1990, 1999). Such a cognitive defence could be used by perpetrators of sexual violence to exonerate their actions while blaming the victim (Bandura, 1990, 1999). An example that highlights this process is the acceptance of myths about rape (Vance et al., 2015). Some examples of commonly held beliefs about rape include the idea that a victim must have “asked for it” by being seductive or careless, and that sexual assault is often not an act of violence but the result of uncontrollable passion (e.g. Iconis, 2008). Holding such beliefs about rape has been linked with in-person sexual violence, sexually coercive behaviours, and rape proclivity (Abbey et al., 2012; Bohner et al., 2005; Bouffard et al., 2016; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015).

Just as rape myths may be employed to put the blame on the victim or minimise and excuse sexual violence, acceptance of myths related to IBSA may be employed in NCII cases (e.g. Powell et al., 2019). Victims of NCII are frequently held responsible and blamed for their victimisation, especially in cases where they had taken the photo that was eventually shared with others (Zvi & Bitton, 2021). Some may view NCII as inevitable and believe that sexts do not generally stay private (Clancy et al., 2020). In a sample of Australian adults, 70% agreed that individuals should be wise enough not to take an intimate image of themselves, and 62% agreed that someone who sends an intimate picture to another person is at least partially responsible if the picture is posted online (Henry, Flynn, et al., 2018). At the same time, cases of NCII are downplayed as “harmless” and “funny” (Clancy et al., 2019, 2020). For example, as reported by Naezer and van Oosterhout (2021), in one case of NCII, the mother of the perpetrator made fun of the disseminated image and even asked for it to be forwarded to her. Collectively, these results suggest that often NCII is not only tolerated but accepted and enjoyed by many. Alarming, attitudes that focus on blaming the victim or minimising and excusing NCII may even be held by people the victim would turn to for support and help, including teachers and police officers (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Although research on rape myths is extensive (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), little work has been focused on IBSA-related myths, their predictors, and how they relate to NCII.

Aims and potential implications of the current study

Despite the growing public and media attention, little research has examined the tendency to perpetrate NCII, the attitudes surrounding it, such as finding it amusing, exciting, or acceptable and the belief systems that support these attitudes, for instance the acceptance of myths related to IBSA. The current study aims to bridge this gap in the literature. More specifically, the objectives of this study were to (1) assess the prevalence of NCII proclivity, approval, and enjoyment in a sample of undergraduate students; (2) provide a preliminary understanding of the correlational relationships between dark personality traits and the propensities to accept IBSA-related myths and engage in NCII perpetration; (3) assess the predictors of IBSA-related myth acceptance; and (4) assess the predictors of NCII proclivity, enjoyment, and approval. Based on previous empirical studies, we predicted that there would be a significant positive relationship between (1) the Dark Tetrad and

prone to NCII perpetration and acceptance of IBSA-related myths; (2) IBSA-myth acceptance and NCII perpetration.

Given the ever-increasing rates of sexting and the incredibly negative impact NCII can have on a victim, it is crucial to better understand the belief systems of potential NCII perpetrators who may view NCII as acceptable, enjoyable, and an appropriate course of action when the circumstances are right. Support for our predictions, will in turn inform the creation of educational material and intervention strategies that directly target the belief systems influenced by acceptance of false IBSA-myths, which could ultimately help many.

Method

Participants

Participants were 816 undergraduate students from a Canadian university who participated in exchange for course credit between October 2019 and February 2020. Six individuals self-identifying as transgender, non-binary, or other were excluded from the analysis. The final sample consisted of 810 participants, ranging in age from 16–60 ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 4.29$). Most participants self-identified as female (72.0%) and heterosexual (81.4%). More specifically, 2.6% of the sample identified as homosexual, 11.8% as bisexual, 0.6% as asexual, 2.5% as pansexual, 0.4% as queer, and 0.6% as other. Given that the majority of the sample was heterosexual, all other sexual orientations were binned into one category. A broad range of ethnicities was represented in this sample (12.5% Asian, 10.6% Black, 2.6% East Indian, 33.5% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.7% Indigenous, First Nation, Inuit, Métis, 34.2% White, 3.4% Other).

Procedure

Data collection took place online using Qualtrics from October 2019 to February 2020. The study was approved by the university's Research Ethics Board-B (CUREB-B). Before commencing the study, participants read the consent form that included information about the purpose, content, and potential triggers of the study. After indicating their consent, participants provided demographic information. Then, they proceeded to complete a series of surveys and questionnaires in random order. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed.

Measures

Sexual image-based abuse myth acceptance (SIAMA; Powell et al., 2019)

The SIAMA is modelled after the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et al., 1999) and has two subscales: the Minimise/Excuse subscale containing 12 items and the Blame subscale containing 6 items. Participants rated their agreement with each item using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 ("Strongly Agree"). The score for each subscale and the total score were computed by summing the participants' responses to the relevant questions. Higher scores denote higher rates of acceptance of IBSA-related myths. The Minimise/Excuse subscale ranges from 12 to 84, the Blame subscale from 6 to 42, and the total score from 18 to 126. To date, there is no research on the psychometric properties of the scale, but its creators, Powell and colleagues (2019), reported good reliability in a sample of more than four thousand Australians, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .86 to .94.

Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2021)

The Short Dark Tetrad (SD4; Paulhus et al., 2021) is comprised of 4 subscales of 7 items each, assessing Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism. Participants rate their agreement to each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree").

Subscale scores are computed by averaging participants' responses for all relevant items and range from 1 to 5, with higher scores representative of possessing greater levels of that trait. All subscales have been shown to have adequate reliability in student and university samples, with Cronbach's α 's ranging from .71 to .83 (Paulhus et al., 2021). The structure of the SD4 has also been validated in a large sample of young adults ($n = 3975$; Neumann et al., 2021).

Revenge porn proclivity scale (RPPS; Pina et al., 2017)

Participants read scenarios in which they are the central character and conclude with them sharing an intimate image of another person without consent. In addition to the five scenarios originally in the scale, we included a sixth scenario to capture a situation where pictures were disseminated to brag (Appendix A). After each scenario, participants were asked to respond to a proclivity question (i.e. "In this situation, would you do the same?") using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Definitely would not do the same", 5 = "Definitely would do the same"). A participant's proclivity score was computed by summing their ratings across all six scenarios and ranged from 6 to 30. Moreover, participants were asked to report how excited, amused, angry, and regretful they would feel after disseminating the nude or sexual picture of someone else without permission in each scenario, using a 5-point Likert scale (e.g. "In this situation, how excited would you be?"; 1 = "Not at all", 5 = "Very"). Finally, participants were asked the degree to which they would blame the victim in each scenario on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "Very"). The sum of the responses to the questions on excitement and amusement was used to compute the revenge porn enjoyment subscale score, which ranged from 12 to 60. Next, the sum of the responses to the questions on regret, anger, and blame (reverse scored) was used to compute the revenge porn approval subscale score, which ranged from 18 to 90. Research on the psychometric properties of the RPPS is limited, but Pina and colleagues (2017) found that the proclivity subscale ($\alpha = .76$), as well as the enjoyment ($\alpha = .87$) and approval ($\alpha = .80$) subscales, all have adequate reliability. Higher scores represent higher levels of acceptance of NCII proclivity, enjoyment, and acceptance.

Analyses

The reliability of the scales used in the study was assessed by computing Cronbach's α 's. A Pearson's correlation analysis was used to identify any significant relationships between dark personality traits, SIAMA, and NCII proclivity, enjoyment, and approval. We employed hierarchical regression analysis to assess the predictors of SIAMA, wherein gender and sexual orientation were entered in the first step, and Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism were entered in the second step. Finally, we also employed hierarchical regression analysis to assess the predictors of NCII proclivity, enjoyment, and approval, and entered gender and sexual orientation in the first step, the SD4 dark personality traits in the second step, and the SIAMA total score in the third step.

Results

Data screening

For each variable with missing data, a chi-square test was conducted to determine whether the gender (male or female) or sexual orientation (heterosexual or LGBTQ+) of participants with missing data differed from those with completed data. No significant differences were identified (all p 's > .05), suggesting that any missing data were missing at random. In the subsequent analysis, missing values were dealt with using pairwise deletion. All SD4 subscales and both SIAMA subscales as well as the total SIAMA score were normally distributed. The RPPS enjoyment subscale was also found to follow a normal distribution. However, the total RPPS score, and the approval subscale did not. Taking the log version of the total RPPS score and the approval subscale was enough to bring the skewness and kurtosis values to acceptable levels. The intercorrelations across all independent

variables were also assessed. All variance inflation factors were found to be < 10 , meaning there was no multicollinearity present.

Not opposed and in agreement categorisation

Prevalence of NCII proclivity, approval, and enjoyment was assessed using two different cut-offs producing two different categories: (1) not opposed and (2) in agreement. We also computed the proclivity score using only the original 5 scenarios described in the article by Pina and colleagues (2018), using the not-opposed cut-off score in the original 5 scenarios.

First, participants who selected any option other than “Definitely would not do the same” for any of the NCII scenarios were regarded as not opposed to NCII proclivity. Participants were also regarded as not opposed to victim blaming if they selected an option other than “none at all” when asked how much they would blame the victim. Similarly, they were considered as not opposed to enjoying or approving of NCII if they selected any option other than “not at all” when asked how excited, amused, regretful (reverse scored), or angry they would feel.

Participants who selected the option “Probably would have done the same” or “Definitely would have done the same” were considered as in agreement with NCII perpetration proclivity. Further, participants who selected the option “Fairly” or “Very” at least once when asked if they would feel excited or amused when perpetrating NCII were considered to agree with NCII enjoyment. Participants who selected at least once “A lot” or “A great deal” when asked how much they would blame the victim and were thus considered as in agreement with victim blaming, or those selecting “Fairly” or “Very” when asked if they would feel angry or regretful (reverse-scored), were considered as in agreement with NCII approval.

Finally, the original RPPS contained five scenarios, and participants were regarded as endorsing NCII proclivity, enjoyment, and approval if they did not emphatically disagree with all relevant questions (Pina et al., 2017). This is the same cut-off that we used for the “not opposed” category.

Prevalence of NCII proclivity, approval, and enjoyment

Not opposed to NCII

In our sample, 48.2% of participants were not opposed to NCII perpetration (Table 1). Moreover, 71.4% of participants were not opposed to enjoying NCII and 97.8% were not opposed to approving NCII (Table 1).

When examining only the 5 original scenarios created by Pina and colleagues, we found that 29.4% of participants (25.8% of females and 39.0% of males; 29.6% of heterosexual and 28.8% of LGBTQ+ participants) did not oppose NCII proclivity. A chi-square of association was used to find if there was a relationship between those who were not opposed to any of the five original scenarios proposed by Pina and colleagues (2017) and the sixth new scenario we added, and the test was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 767) = 91.84, p < .001, \phi = .346$.

In agreement with NCII

In our sample, 16.5% of participants were considered to agree with NCII proclivity perpetration (Table 1). Further, 35.8% of our sample were considered to agree with enjoying NCII (Table 1), while 92.7% of participants were considered to agree with approving of NCII (Table 1).

Correlations

Bivariate correlations were computed between all variables (Table 2). Acceptance of IBSA-related myths was moderately, positively correlated with all SD4 measures (Table 2). Similarly, NCII enjoyment also had moderate, positive correlations with all SD4 measures. NCII proclivity was positively correlated with all SD4 measures, although the correlations were weaker (r 's ranged from .08 to

Table 1. NCII Proclivity, Enjoyment, and Approval Prevalence.

	Not Opposed					In Agreement				
	Gender		Sexual Orientation			Gender		Sexual Orientation		
	Total	Male	Female	Heterosexual	LGBQ+	Total	Male	Female	Heterosexual	LGBQ+
NCII Enjoyment	539 (71.4%)	167 (78.4%)	372 (68.5%)	445 (71.5%)	94 (70.1%)	286 (35.8%)	91 (41.7%)	195 (33.5%)	228 (34.8%)	58 (40.3%)
Excited	480 (63.4%)	149 (70.0%)	331 (60.8%)	394 (63.2%)	86 (64.2%)	227 (28.4%)	74 (33.9%)	153 (26.3%)	179 (27.3%)	48 (33.3%)
Amused	493 (65.2%)	157 (73.7%)	336 (61.9%)	411 (66.1%)	82 (61.2%)	230 (28.7%)	71 (32.6%)	159 (27.3%)	185 (28.2%)	45 (31.3%)
NCII Approval	782 (97.8%)	212 (97.2%)	570 (97.9%)	644 (98.2%)	138 (95.8%)	741 (92.7%)	198 (90.8%)	543 (93.5%)	610 (93.1%)	131 (91.0%)
Angry	778 (97.3%)	214 (98.2%)	564 (96.9%)	638 (97.3%)	140 (97.2%)	697 (87.1%)	177 (81.2%)	520 (89.3%)	572 (87.2%)	125 (86.8%)
Blame (R)	585 (73.1%)	177 (81.2%)	408 (70.1%)	498 (75.9%)	87 (60.4%)	277 (34.7%)	88 (40.4%)	189 (32.5%)	241 (36.8%)	36 (25.0%)
Regretful (R)	636 (79.5%)	181 (83.0%)	455 (78.2%)	529 (80.6%)	107 (74.3%)	276 (34.5%)	93 (42.7%)	183 (31.5%)	226 (34.5%)	50 (34.7%)
NCII Proclivity	370 (48.2%)	109 (51.2%)	261 (47.1%)	305 (48.5%)	65 (47.1%)	132 (16.5%)	49 (22.3%)	83 (14.3%)	112 (17.0%)	20 (13.9%)

Note. The Blame (R) and Regretful (R) scores were reverse coded.

Not Opposed = selected at least one option that did not represent the strongest opposition to each question i.e.: anything other than “Definitely would not do the same” when asked if they would have done the same following each proclivity scenario, and “none at all” when asked how much they would blame the victim in each scenario and “not at all” when asked how excited/amused/angry/regretful they would feel if they were the perpetrator in each scenario..

In Agreement = selected at least one option that agreed with the question, i.e.: “Probably would have done the same”/ “Definitely would have done the same” when asked if they would have done the same following each proclivity scenario, or “A lot”/“A great deal” when asked how much they would blame the victim in each scenario or “Fairly”/“Very” when asked how excited/amused/angry/regretful they would feel if they were the perpetrator in each scenario.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Cronbach's α (in brackets) for Measured Variables.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
SD4											
1) Sadism	16.64 (5.93)	(.80)									
2) Machiavellianism	22.53 (5.04)	.36*** (.29 – .43)	(.79)								
3) Narcissism	20.03 (5.22)	.30*** (.22 – .37)	.43*** (.36 – .50)	(.80)							
4) Psychopathy	14.11 (5.18)	.49*** (.42 – .56)	.35*** (.28 – .42)	.47*** (.41 – .53)	(.82)						
SIAMA											
5) Minimise/excuse	22.01 (9.86)	.30*** (.23 – .37)	.27*** (.20 – .34)	.23*** (.15 – .31)	.32*** (.23 – .39)	(.87)					
6) Blame	17.57 (9.00)	.15*** (.08 – .22)	.27*** (.20 – .34)	.12** (.05 – .19)	.15*** (.06 – .23)	.47*** (.41 – .53)	(.88)				
7) Total	39.56 (16.18)	.27*** (.20 – .33)	.32*** (.25 – .38)	.21*** (.13 – .29)	.28*** (.19 – .35)	.87*** (.85 – .89)	.84*** (.82 – .86)	(.89)			
RPPS											
8) NCII Enjoyment	18.97 (7.75)	.35*** (.30 – .41)	.24*** (.11 – .25)	.25*** (.17 – .32)	.32*** (.24 – .39)	.46*** (.38 – .54)	.29*** (.22 – .35)	.44*** (.37 – .51)	(.89)		
9) NCII Approval	56.94 (8.20)	.01 (-.07 – .09)	-.06 (-.14 – .02)	.001 (-.08 – .07)	-.02 (-.11 – .07)	.09* (.02 – .16)	.17*** (.10 – .24)	.15*** (.08 – .22)	-.04 (-.12 – .03)	(.74)	
10) NCII Proclivity	8.41 (4.72)	.10** (.03 – .17)	.08* (.004 – .16)	.11** (.02 – .18)	.11*** (.04 – .18)	.21*** (.13 – .30)	.06 (-.01 – .14)	.16*** (.08 – .25)	.25*** (.17 – .34)	.01 (-.06 – .07)	(.89)

Note. SD4 = The Short Dark Tetrad (Paulhus et al., 2018); SIAMA = Sexual Image-Based Abuse Myth Acceptance (Powell et al., 2019). RPPS = Revenge Porn Proclivity Scale (Pina et al., 2017). NCII = Non-consensual Intimate Image Dissemination.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

.11; Table 2). However, there was no relationship between NCII approval and any of the SD4 measures (Table 2). Finally, weak to moderate positive correlations were found between acceptance of IBSA-related myths and NCII enjoyment, approval, and proclivity (Table 2).

Predicting acceptance of IBSA-related myths

We examined how gender, sexual orientation, and dark personality traits (psychopathy, sadism, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) predict acceptance of IBSA-related myths. To do so, we employed a stepwise hierarchical regression model. Gender and sexual orientation were entered together in the first step, while all four dark personality traits were entered together in the second step. We did so to assess the effect of dark personality traits on IBSA-related myth acceptance that goes above and beyond demographics. A summary of results is found in Table 3.

SIAMA total score

Model 1, which included gender and sexual orientation was statistically significant and explained 4% of the variance (Table 3). The addition of the dark personality traits in Model 2 was also significant and explained an additional 12% of the variance (Table 3). In Model 2, higher self-reported scores in Machiavellianism ($\beta = 4.90, p < .001$), psychopathy ($\beta = 3.40, p < .001$), and sadism ($\beta = 1.66, p = .039$), were all predictive of accepting myths related to IBSA. Similarly, identifying as male ($\beta = -2.59, p = .051$) and heterosexual ($\beta = -5.10, p < .001$) was also predictive of a higher degree of IBSA-related myth acceptance (Table 3).

Minimise/excuse subscale score

Model 1 for the Minimise/Excuse SIAMA subscale that only contained gender and sexual orientation was significant and explained 3% of the variance (Table 3). Model 2 that also contained the SD4 dark personality traits was significant and explained an additional 13% of the variance (Table 3). Identifying as male ($\beta = -2.21, p = .011$), and scoring higher on a psychopathy ($\beta = 2.64, p < .001$), Machiavellianism ($\beta = 1.85, p < .001$), and sadism ($\beta = 1.47, p = .003$) measure, were all predictive of accepting more minimising or excusing IBSA-related myths (Table 3).

Blame subscale score

Finally, Model 1 for the Blame SIAMA subscale containing only gender and sexual orientation was significant and explained 3% of the variance (Table 3). In Model 2, the SD4 dark personality traits were added, and the model explained an additional 7% of the variance (Table 3). Identifying as male ($\beta = -1.50, p < .001$), heterosexual ($\beta = -2.84, p = .001$), and scoring higher in Machiavellianism ($\beta = 3.16, p < .001$), were all predictive of accepting more victim-blaming IBSA-related myths in Model 2 (Table 3).

Predicting not opposing NCII proclivity, approval, and enjoyment

Next, we examined the demographic, personality, and attitudinal predictors of NCII proclivity. We entered gender and sexual orientation in the first step of the regression model and SD4 in the second step. In the third step of the regression model, we added the SIAMA variables (total, minimise/excuse, and blame). A summary of results is found in Table 4.

NCII proclivity

Model 1 that contained only gender and sexual orientation was significant and predicted 1% of the variance of NCII proclivity (Table 4). The inclusion of the SD4 dark personality traits along with gender and sexual orientation explained an additional 3% of the variance (Table 4). Finally, adding SIAMA total, blame, and minimise/excuse, explained an additional 7% of the variance of NCII proclivity

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting the SIAMA total, SIAMA Minimise/Excuse, and SIAMA Blame scores.

Variable	SIAMA total				SIAMA minimise/excuse				SIAMA blame			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Constant	55.36***		25.19***		30.13***		11.01***		25.34***		13.06***	
Gender	-6.03***	-0.16	-2.59 ⁺	-0.07	-3.48***	-0.16	-2.21*	-0.09	-2.63***	-0.13	-1.50*	-0.07
Sexual Orientation	-4.43**	-0.11	-5.10***	-0.12	-1.75	-0.07	-1.14	-0.05	-2.65***	-0.11	-2.84***	-0.12
Machiavellianism			4.90***	0.21			1.85***	0.13			3.16***	0.25
Narcissism			-0.16	-0.01			0.33	0.03			-0.39	-0.03
Psychopathy			3.40***	0.16			2.64***	0.20			0.58	0.05
Sadism			1.66*	0.09			1.47**	0.13			0.18	0.02
<i>R</i> ²	0.04		0.15		0.03		0.15		0.03		0.09	
<i>F</i>	17.20***		24.02***		12.62***		23.91***		13.60***		14.25***	
ΔR^2	0.04		0.12		0.03		0.13		0.03		0.07	
ΔF	17.20***		26.29***		12.62***		28.65***		13.60***		14.12***	

Note. *: $p < .05$; **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$; ⁺: $p = .051$

Table 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting NCII proclivity, NCII enjoyment, and NCII approval.

Variables	NCII proclivity						NCII enjoyment						NCII approval					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Constant	0.96***		0.80***		0.76***		24.00***		8.45***		4.80***		1.73***		1.71***		1.73***	
Gender	-0.03*	-0.09	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01	-0.03	-3.22***	-0.19	-1.12**	-0.07	-0.71*	-0.04	0.01*	0.08	0.02*	0.11	0.02*	0.10
Sexual Orientation	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01	-0.01	0.42	0.02	0.10	0.01	0.79	0.64	0.001	0.004	0.001	-0.001	-0.004	-0.02
Machiavellianism			0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01			0.87	0.07	0.10	0.01			-0.001	-0.06	-0.002	-0.02
Narcissism			0.01	0.06	0.01	0.05			0.85*	0.08	0.75 ⁺	0.07			0.003	0.04	0.003	0.03
Psychopathy			0.02 ⁺	0.09	0.01	0.04			1.49***	0.14	0.84*	0.08			-0.01	0.04	-0.004	-0.04
Sadism			0.01	0.06	0.04	0.02			1.80***	0.20	1.40***	0.15			0.01	0.11*	0.01*	0.11
SIAMA – blame					-0.01	-0.05					0.80*	0.09					-0.001	-0.15
SIAMA – min./exc.					0.05***	0.30					0.25***	0.33					0.001	-0.01
SIAMA – total					0.01	0.01					0.17**	0.02					-0.001	0.001
<i>R</i> ²	0.01		0.03		0.10		0.04		0.16		0.28		0.004		0.01		0.03	
<i>F</i>	3.60*		4.97***		10.69***		13.19***		24.01***		35.65***		2.47		1.94		3.39***	
ΔR^2	0.01		0.03		0.07		0.04		0.13		0.12		0.004		0.01		0.02	
ΔF	3.60*		5.61***		26.80***		13.19***		28.42***		58.99***		2.47		1.67		7.61***	

Note. SIAMA – min./exc.: SIAMA – minimise/excuse. *: $p < .05$; **: $p < .01$; ***: $p < .001$, ⁺ $p = .051$

(Table 4). Only acceptance of minimising/excusing IBSA myths remained as a significant predictor of NCII proclivity ($\beta = .05$, $p < .001$).

NCII enjoyment

Both Model 1 that contained only gender and sexual orientation, and Model 2 that contained in addition to gender and sexual orientation the SD4 dark personality traits were significant and explained 4% and 16% of the variance of not opposing NCII enjoyment, respectively (Table 4). Adding acceptance of IBSA-related myths in Model 3 also produced a significant model for the prediction of not opposing NCII enjoyment and accounted for an additional 12% of the variance (Table 4). Higher sadism ($\beta = 1.40$, $p < .001$), psychopathy ($\beta = .84$, $p = .042$), and narcissism ($\beta = .75$, $p = .051$) scores were all predictive of not opposing NCII enjoyment (Table 4). Finally, acceptance of more IBSA-related myths in general ($\beta = .17$, $p = .014$), and acceptance of both IBSA myths that focused on minimising or excusing IBSA ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$) or blaming the victim ($\beta = .80$, $p = .013$) were predictive of not opposing NCII enjoyment (Table 4).

NCII approval

Model 3 that contained gender, sexual orientation, the SD4 dark personality traits, and SIAMA scores was significant, but only accounted for 0.30% of the variance of not opposing NCII approval (Table 4). Identifying as a woman ($\beta = .002$, $p = .014$) and scoring higher in sadism ($\beta = .01$, $p = .014$) were predictive of not opposing NCII approval.

Discussion

The current study aimed to assess the prevalence of NCII approval, enjoyment, and proclivity, examine the correlational relationship between acceptance of IBSA-related myths, NCII, and dark personality traits, and ascertain the predictors of IBSA-related myth acceptance, and NCII enjoyment, approval, and proclivity. This is the first study to examine the predictors of myths specific to online harassment and how acceptance of such myths translates to approval, enjoyment, and propensity to perpetrate acts of online sexual violence.

The majority of our sample did not oppose the enjoyment or approval of NCII. Moreover, there was notable support for not opposing NCII proclivity. IBSA-related myths were predicted by Machiavellianism, psychopathy, sadism, being a man, and heterosexuality. Sadism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and being a man were also predictive of greater acceptance of minimising IBSA myths. Machiavellianism, identifying as a man, and heterosexuality also predicted greater acceptance of victim-blaming myths. Acceptance of minimising/excusing IBSA myths predicted NCII proclivity over and above the other predictors. Interestingly, all the dark personality traits except for Machiavellianism predicted greater NCII enjoyment. Accepting general IBSA-related myths, IBSA myths that minimise and excuse IBSA and myths that blame the victim predicted not opposing NCII enjoyment, whereas being a woman and sadism predicted not opposing the approval of NCII.

NCII motivations

Previous work using the same proclivity scale found that 28.6% of the participants in a community sample did not oppose NCII proclivity (Pina et al., 2017). In our study, we included an additional scenario that asked participants if they would ever disseminate the intimate image of their partner to brag (Pina et al., 2017). Without the inclusion of the extra scenario, we found a comparable proclivity of not opposing NCII of 29.4%. When taking into consideration the additional scenario, we found that 48.2% of the participants did not oppose NCII. Previous work found that in a sample of 505 young adults, 15.9% reported they had disseminated a sext to get attention or praise (Clancy et al., 2019). Thus, taken together, our results highlight how motivations regarding NCII perpetration may differ

and underlie the importance of considering a need for bragging and attention as a serious motivation behind NCII.

Other work has estimated that NCII perpetration may range from 10% to 20% (Clancy et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2019, 2020). Therefore, it is suggested that the incidence of NCII may not be as rare as previously thought. Additionally, the proclivity for NCII could be even higher than the incidence of NCII perpetration. For instance, in our sample 16.5% of the participants agreed that there are circumstances under which they would commit NCII. This suggests that as dating evolves to depend more heavily on online interactions and more people engage in sexting, instances of NCII may also rise still.

Alarming, the majority of our sample was not opposed to enjoying (71.4%) or approving (97.8%) NCII. Comparable rates of not opposing NCII enjoyment (87%) and approval (99%) were found in previous work (Pina et al., 2017). Across the three cut-off scores we used, we found that NCII approval, and even enjoyment, were higher than proclivity for NCII perpetration. In other words, some participants may not have endorsed that they would ever disseminate an intimate image without consent themselves, but they might excuse or even enjoy such behaviours. More specifically, 35.8% agreed that they enjoyed NCII perpetration, 92.7% endorsed they accepted NCII. Given the high rates of participants finding NCII material amusing and/or exciting underlines how NCII material may be used as “goods” sold to willing consumers. This also suggests that policymakers should crack down on host websites that allow such material on their websites, thus allowing and reinforcing NCII perpetration.

Moreover, not opposing victim-blaming is not the same as supporting the victim and coming to their aid. NCII victims are not only often blamed for their victimisation, but their images may be subject to ridicule (Hall & Hearn, 2019). Given that NCII material is often shared via public channels, such as online forums, webpages, or social media (Henry & Flynn, 2019), means that bystanders and their choice to side with the perpetrator, the victim, or remain passive viewers, are central to the dynamic of NCII. Based on how they choose to react to NCII when they come across it, bystanders can play a key role in supporting the victim and putting a stop to future incidents (Moxey & Bussey, 2019). Thus, educational material on NCII prevention should not only include material focused on dispelling IBSA-related myths, but also material with actionable, concrete steps that would help those who come across NCII materials as bystanders report the material and offer support to the victim.

The role of gender in IBSA and IBSA-related myth acceptance

The almost unanimous approval of NCII could also underlie a larger cultural issue that dictates leniency towards the perpetrator, while the blame is placed on the victim. We found that 73.1% of the participants were not opposed to blaming the victim and 34.8% agreed that the victim was to blame in the NCII scenarios presented to them. This is particularly pertinent in cases where the victim took an intimate image of themselves and shared it in the form of a sext with someone who then disseminated it to others without consent (Citron & Franks, 2014; Zvi & Bitton, 2021). Gender bias may also play a critical role here due to the sexual double standards that prescribe women being judged more harshly than men for their sexual expression and behaviours (Gentry, 1998). Women who are deemed as “promiscuous” or “sexually deviant” are often punished with ridicule and personal attacks (Papp et al., 2015). This type of response is also typical for female victims of IBSA who are often viewed as sexually promiscuous for having shared a nude or sexual image of themselves with another person, despite them never permitting for their pictures to become public (Hall & Hearn, 2019; Hearn & Hall, 2018; McKinlay & Lavis, 2020; Zvi & Bitton, 2021).

We also found that identifying as heterosexual and male were both predictive of SIAMA. Work on face-to-face sexual violence has consistently found men to be more likely to accept false beliefs about rape and sexual assault (for a meta-analysis, see Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Although research on TFSV- and IBSA-related myths is scant, in a previous study that explored the motivations behind sext dissemination, the researchers uncovered themes that parallel sexual image-based abuse myths (Clancy et al., 2020). For example, in a sample of men who had disseminated sexts

without permission, more than half of the participants (55%) reported doing so because they did not think it was a big deal (Clancy et al., 2020). In another study, men were more likely than women to agree that NCII is funny, can enhance their social status, and is acceptable after a break-up (Clancy et al., 2019). Additionally, specifically for cases where sext dissemination follows the event of a relationship breakdown, Hearn and Hall (2018) highlight the importance of gender hierarchies and note that the perceived loss of power in a relationship may leave the male counterpart feeling emasculated. In turn, disseminating the sexual image of their ex who “embarrassed” them, could be viewed as a way to put them in their place and turn power and control back to themselves (Hearn & Hall, 2018).

Dark personality traits and IBSA-related myth acceptance

Furthermore, all dark personality traits were positively correlated with SIAMA, and all four dark traits, except for narcissism, retained independent prediction of IBSA-related myth acceptance. Given that NCII is often portrayed as an act of revenge, it is understandable how a cluster of personality traits that are characterised by lack of remorse, empathy, callous affect, and a greater concern for own gratifications compared to the well-being of others, would gravitate towards SIAMA (Jonason et al., 2010; Malesza, 2020). Moreover, individuals who score higher in Machiavellianism may score higher on the Blame subscale of SIAMA due to their propensity to use other people and deceive them (Rauthmann & Will, 2011). It would make sense if, to them, it is the victim’s fault for sending the image and not their own for disseminating it. Alternatively, they may feel that the victim is to blame for their exploitation because they *allowed* themselves to be manipulated. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the associations between Machiavellianism and rape-myth acceptance (Boland, 2018; Jonason et al., 2017).

Factors associated with NCII

Finally, we assessed how demographic characteristics (gender, sexual orientation), personality traits (Dark Tetrad), and attitudes (SIAMA) predicted NCII acceptance, enjoyment, and proclivity. We found that scoring high on a self-report measure of narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism, along with accepting a higher number of IBSA-related myths were predictive of endorsing enjoyment for NCII. This is consistent with previous literature on sadism, which has been found to be directly associated with enjoying other people’s suffering (Buckels et al., 2013). The Dark Triad is also characterised by a lack of empathy (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), which may explain our findings.

Acceptance of myths that focused on minimising or excusing IBSA was predictive of NCII proclivity. Previous work found that accepting IBSA-related myths was predictive of IBSA-perpetration (Powell et al., 2019). These results parallel what we know about in-person sexual violence, where research has shown that believing in rape myths has regularly been shown to be associated with engaging in sexual aggression or sexual coercion (e.g. Barner, 2003; Widman & Olson, 2013). Furthermore, these findings underscore how dangerous false beliefs about IBSA really are and raise alarms about the way IBSA cases are presented and discussed in online spaces. Online spaces that host IBSA-related material are riddled with dehumanising and misogynistic language (Hall & Hearn, 2019; Hearn & Hall, 2018). Even the term “revenge pornography”, which is commonly used in the media and research alike, paints a victim-blaming picture. It conjures the image of a scorned lover and raises questions as to what the victim did to deserve revenge.

Consequently, our results highlight the need for educational material targeted at dispelling IBSA-related myths and urgently calls for a change in the way we discuss IBSA. Unfortunately, there remain limitations in what is known about the overall efficacy of current education programmes as the findings vary across programme-type, audience (mixed versus male- and female-online programming), and programme goals (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Iconis, 2008). However, studies show that education programmes that emphasise one topic at a time are more effective than those

that cover various sexual assault-related issues at a time (Anderson & Whiston, 2005). Moreover, Anderson and Whiston (2005) found educational materials that focus on providing general information and dissect rape myths and facts are effective, even more so when sexual assault education is taught over longer periods of time. Similarly, focusing on changing attitudes to reduce victim-blame and promote bystander intervention has shown some promise (Martini & De Piccoli, 2020). Therefore, taken together, it is suggested that the creation of educational material specific to NCII and dispelling myths surrounding it could be a very promising endeavour.

Limitations and discussion of diversity

Our first main limitation is that we utilised a convenience sample of undergraduate students, and thus our results may not be applicable to the general population. In addition, most of the sample was female and heterosexual. To make meaningful comparisons, all non-heterosexual sexual orientations were binned into one category, thus missing rich information about how different sexual orientations relate to SIAMA and NCII proclivity. The issue should be addressed in further research. Similarly, our results are based on the gender binary as non-binary, genderqueer, and transgendered individuals were excluded from the study. Further work should also explore how gender non-conforming identities relate with NCI victimisation and perpetration. Race, religion, and ethnic identity were also not examined in the scope of this work but should be given more attention in the future, given how these identities shape cultural understandings, beliefs, and codes of morality, all of which may have a direct effect on whether or not, and what type of, myths related to NCII are accepted.

Given the sensitive nature of the content in our study, it is possible that some participants may have exaggerated, withheld, or skewed their answers due to social desirability bias. Next, it is important to note that NCII proclivity is not the same as NCII perpetration, and someone endorsing approval, enjoyment, or even proclivity for NCII does not necessarily mean that they already have or at some point will disseminate someone else's sexual image without consent. This also means that our results may not be interpreted as an estimate of the prevalence of NCII perpetration. Finally, most of the measures used in this study are fairly new and only have limited information available about key psychometric properties, including their validity and reliability.

Future research

The current study was a first step in exploring the emerging research topic of acceptance of myths specific to IBSA, NCII proclivity, and the relationship between the two. It remains clear that further research is needed to increase our understanding of these topics. For example, research could explore more personality and social factors that may enhance or inhibit the likelihood of accepting such myths or endorsing NCII proclivity. Such factors could include beliefs about gender, feminism, and equality, and non-aversive personality traits, for instance Honesty-Humility, or empathy and compassion. It would also be valuable to examine how these factors relate not only to acceptance of IBSA-related myths, and NCII proclivity, but with actual NCII perpetration as well.

In addition, the potential harassment fuelled by victim-blaming experienced by victims of NCII may have far-reaching, negative consequences, including victims not seeking legal action or police assistance based on the fear they will be judged, blamed for their victimisation, or not taken seriously. This fear may not be unsubstantiated. In one study, researchers found that 36% of the asked officers did not disagree with the statement that online harassment is less serious than traditional harassment (Holt & Bossler, 2012). Therefore, further research on the attitudes of police officers regarding TFSV, cybercrime, and false beliefs about IBSA, and how these attitudes influence the way they interact with victims and handle their cases is critical.

It is also important to understand if education on IBSA is enough to disrupt acceptance of false beliefs about IBSA and if it can also reduce the rates of NCII approval, enjoyment, and proclivity. Similar education efforts disrupting SIAMA should also be included in bystander intervention

educational material. Previous research found that rape myths are highly prevalent in the public comment sections of Facebook posts about news stories covering sexual violence (Clay, 2019). In that case, bystanders could interact with the stated false beliefs and even correct them, thus educating the initial poster. Therefore, increasing bystander intervention rates has the potential to result in meaningful reductions of online victimisation and better support for the victim, improving the online experience for many.

Finally, future research should also take an intersectional approach when researching NCII approval, enjoyment, and SIAMA. This is because, although instances of online harassment might appear to be isolated or random at first glance, anonymous cyber-mobs tend to systematically and disproportionately target women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people of colour (Citron, 2009). Therefore, a research study could investigate if participants would be more likely to excuse, minimise, or blame the victim in NCII instances where the gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation of the victim is known.

Conclusion

In summation, despite the devastating impact of NCII on the victim, it remains understudied. Our results suggest that proclivity, approval, and even enjoyment of NCII are fairly common, and that acceptance of myths related to IBSA predict NCII proclivity. This research represents a first step in understanding the attitudes and beliefs that allow, excuse, and predict NCII perpetration. By doing so, we can then produce educational material, intervention strategies, and support resources that can have a great impact on the victims and improve prevention efforts.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix A

Additional Scenario Included in the RPPS

You feel proud of the way your partner looks and how attractive they are. One day, while you are out with one of your friends, your partner sends you a nude picture of themselves, and you decide to show it to your friends to brag about how good-looking your partner is.