



NATIONAL CENTER ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

SEPTEMBER 2024

IDENTIFYING **IMAGE-BASED** SEXUAL ABUSE:

CLASSIFICATIONS AND DEFINITIONS





National Center on Sexual Exploitation

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) is the leading organization preventing sexual abuse and exploitation at mass scale by eliminating institutional practices and societal norms that perpetuate these harms. As leading experts in combating sexual exploitation, NCOSE is uniquely positioned to assist in the critical endeavor of combating image-based sexual abuse. Our decades of experience, combined with extensive research, direct engagement with hundreds of survivors, and advocacy with many other tech giants equips us with a profound understanding of the impacts—both positive and negative—of technology on society.

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In our advanced technological age, forms of sexual abuse¹ and exploitation² involving the use of images or videos frequently occur online. The umbrella term used to refer to these forms of abuse is “image-based sexual abuse” (IBSA)³—the sexual violation of a person committed through the abuse, exploitation, or weaponization of any image⁴ depicting the person. The widespread prevalence of IBSA, as well as the diverse means of perpetrating it, necessitate that the terminology we use to discuss it be finely tuned. Thus, in the taxonomy that follows, we seek to refine and expand classifications of IBSA, the terminology used to name them, and their meanings.⁵ In this effort we aspire to improve public understanding of IBSA and to help shape policymaking aimed at stopping it.



What is IBSA?

IBSA encompasses a wide range of abusive activities including the creation, manipulation, theft, extortion, threatened or actual distribution, or any use of images for sexual purposes without the meaningful consent of the person/s depicted or for purposes of sexual exploitation. It also includes sexual violence or harassment committed towards a person’s representation (e.g., a person’s avatar) in virtual reality or online gaming.



IBSA is Not CSAM

Importantly, sexually explicit⁶ and sexualized⁷ material depicting children ages 0-17 constitutes a distinct class of material, not to be confused with IBSA, known as child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (i.e., “child pornography”)⁸ which is illegal under US federal statute.

1 The second edition of the United Nations *Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Thematic Glossary or Current Terminology Related to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) in the Context of the United Nations* (2017) defines “sexual abuse” as the “Actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions” (p. 4). The glossary further notes that sexual abuse is a broad term that encompasses “rape,” “sexual assault,” “sex with a minor,” and “sexual activity with a minor.” See: https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5BSecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English_0.pdf.

2 The United Nations defines “sexual exploitation” as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including but not limited to profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.” See United Nations Secretariat, “Secretary-General’s Bulletin, Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, ST/SGB/2003/” (United Nations, October 9, 2003), 1303-55040 (E) 101003, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/secretary-generals-bulletin-special-measures-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-sexual-abuse>.

3 According to scholars Clare McGlyne and Erika Rackley, the term “image-based sexual abuse” was first used in a news report appearing in the *Sydney Herald* on October 4, 2015. For more about the origin and history of this term see: Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley, “Image-based Sexual Abuse,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* (2017): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqw033>.

4 An “image” is any visual depiction or representation of a person—including but not limited to materials such as photographs, videos, edited/altered images, or personal representations in virtual reality or online gaming.

5 In this effort we stand on the shoulders of those who have pioneered terminology in this area of sexual abuse. We especially wish to highlight the paper by Clare McGlynn, Erika Rackley, and Ruth Houghton, “Beyond ‘Revenge Porn’: The Continuum of Image-Based Sexual Abuse,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 25 (2017): 25–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-017-9343-2>.

6 18 U.S. Code § 2256 defines “sexually explicit conduct” as “actual or simulated (i) sexual intercourse, including genital-genital, anal-genital, or oral-anal, whether between persons of the same or opposite sex; (ii) bestiality; (iii) masturbation; (iv) sadistic or masochistic abuse; or (v) lascivious exhibition of the anus, genitals, or pubic area of any person. See <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2256>. In this document we use the terms “sexually explicit material” and “pornography” interchangeably.

7 We use the term “sexualized” here to refer to material that meets the legal definition of child pornography or obscenity, but which may not depict sexual activity.

8 CSAM is sexually explicit conduct or lascivious exhibition of the genitals or pubic area of a person under the age of 18. **Nudity is not a required element of the offense under federal law**, 18 USC 2256. See: *United States v. Knox*, 977 F.2d 815, 817 (3d Cir. 1992), vacated and remanded, 510 U.S. 375 (1993); 32 F.3d 733 (3d Cir. 1994), cert denied, 513 U.S. 1109 (1995).

Terminology to be Rejected



In addition to the recommended terms below, it is imperative to observe that some terms in common use in IBSA-related discourse and policy are harmful. The term “nonconsensual intimate imagery” (NCII) is a case in point.

We strongly advise against the use of the term “intimate” to describe IBSA imagery. While some IBSA material distributed nonconsensually is initially created with the consent of those depicted and may therefore be considered by some as “intimate,” to apply the term to all IBSA is a gross mischaracterization of the sexual abuses it attempts to describe. It misapplies the concept of “intimacy” (i.e., that which constitutes closeness between people) to the uses for which *all* IBSA is put—exploitation, extortion, intimidation, harassment, profit, and/or masturbation by countless unknown individuals. The characterization of such behaviors as “intimate” is an example of terminology that puts a euphemistic gloss on exceedingly harmful and un intimate behaviors. Further, many images used in the creation of IBSA are not sexual (or “intimate”) in nature but are of clothed persons not engaged in sexual activity (e.g. using AI to render innocuous images pornographic). Referring to such material under the umbrella of NCII is thus a misnomer.

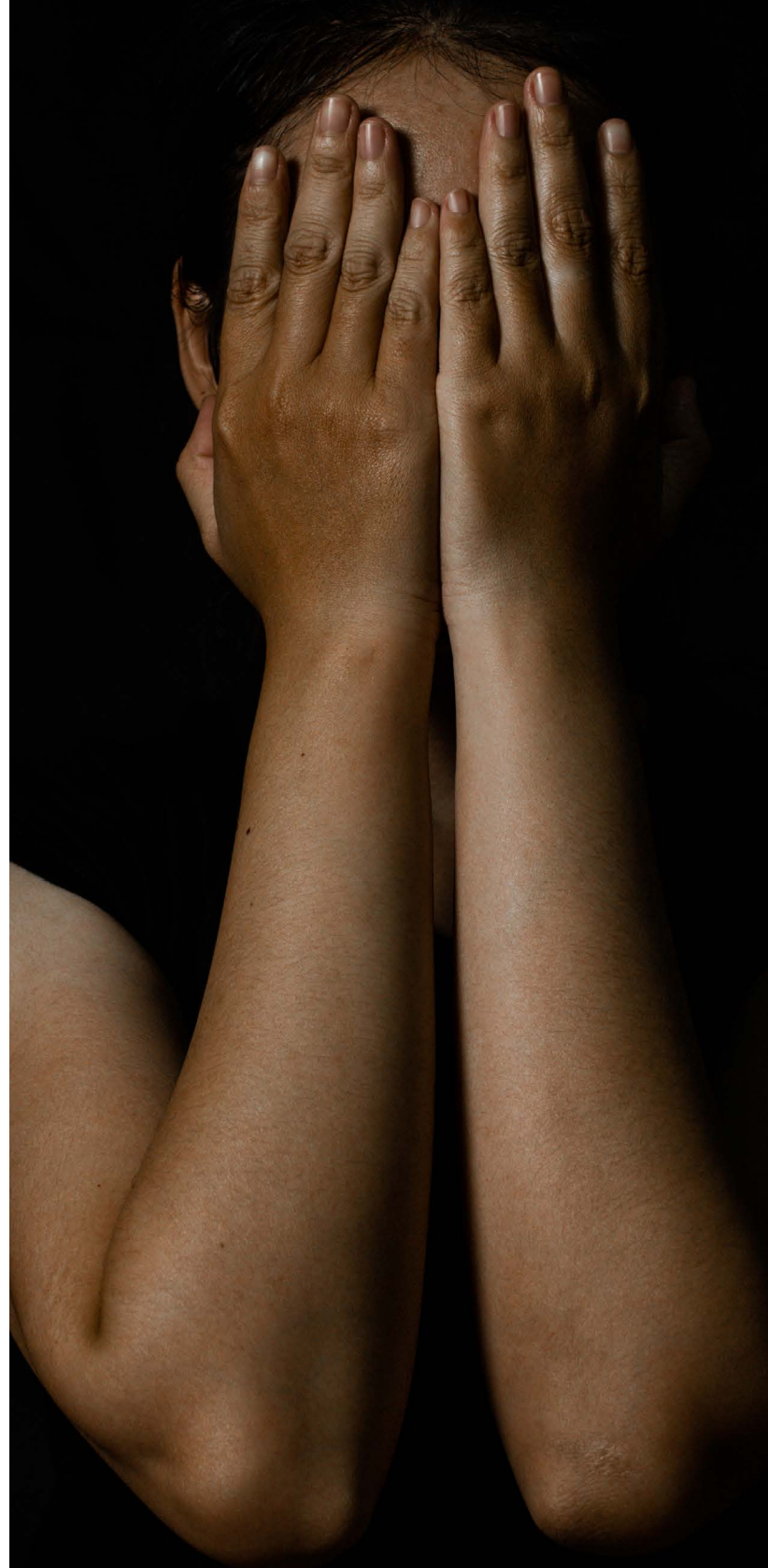



Chart of Classifications and Definitions: Image-based Sexual Abuse

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|  <p>IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE</p> | <p>The sexual violation of a person committed through the abuse, exploitation, or weaponization of any image depicting the person. As an umbrella term, IBSA encompasses a wide range of abusive activities including the creation, manipulation, theft, extortion, threatened or actual distribution, or any use of images for sexual purposes without the meaningful consent of the person/s depicted or for purposes of sexual exploitation. It also includes sexual violence or harassment committed towards a person’s representation (e.g., a person’s avatar) in virtual reality or online gaming.</p> |
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Subcategories of IBSA⁹

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| <p>Nonconsensual Distribution of Sexually Explicit Material</p> | <p>The sharing or online posting of sexually explicit¹⁰ or sexualized¹¹ images or videos of another person without their meaningful consent. This includes, but is not limited to, the distribution of sexual images initially created and exchanged consensually in the context of a romantic relationship, but subsequently redistributed by the recipient to others such as by forwarding to friends, posting on social media sites, or uploading to pornography websites without the permission of the person depicted (commonly referred to as “revenge pornography”⁶). It also includes distribution of nonconsensually created material, such as recordings of sexual assault and rape or AI-generated images. Such images or videos may be shared in their original unaltered form, or in edited formats (e.g., blurring the face of one individual but not another; placing emojis on the faces of people depicted). In many cases, the material is distributed with the intention of causing mental anguish and reputational harm to the victim, or even to provoke the victim to commit self-harm or suicide. “Doxxing,” the sharing of personally identifying information such as a person’s name, address, and workplace, frequently accompanies nonconsensual distribution of sexually explicit material.</p> |
| <p>Collection of Nonconsensually Distributed Sexually Explicit Materials</p> | <p>This activity involves the swapping and/or collection of nonconsensually distributed sexually explicit material from text/messaging groups or third-party Internet platforms for private or member-only collections. Collections can become a form of “social currency” among traders, and collectors may “target” specific individuals by working collectively with others to obtain sexually explicit materials of targeted persons. Collectors are not necessarily creators of IBSA material.</p> |

⁹ Subcategories of image-based sexual abuse may overlap with other subcategories.

¹⁰ See footnote 5 for our definition of “sexually explicit.”

¹¹ Here “sexualized” refers to material depicting adults in ways intended to sexually arouse the viewer. Examples may include wearing of lingerie, depictions of undressing or nudity, etc.

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| <p>Recorded Sexual Violence (RSV)</p> | <p>The taking pictures or creating videos of another person’s sexual assault or rape. Recorded sexual violence often depicts persons who have been drugged or who are incapacitated, as well as sex trafficking victims who are subjected to serial rape by their sex traffickers and buyers. Such recordings are typically shared with others, and in some cases, are distributed on Internet platforms, commonly mainstream pornography websites.</p> |
| <p>Sexual Extortion</p> | <p>The use of sexual images to blackmail the person (or persons) depicted for the purpose of obtaining more sexually explicit material or money, coercion into in-person sex or sex trafficking, pressuring the person to stay in a relationship, or other benefits to the perpetrator. The sexual images may initially be shared consensually, may be obtained by theft (e.g., computer hacking), by alteration of nonsexual images of the person (i.e., forged pornography), or other means.¹² Sexual extortion is popularly referred to as “sextortion.”</p> |
| <p>Sexual Violence in Virtual or Augmented Reality</p> | <p>Sexual harassment and sexual violence occurring in online or technologically augmented environments in which two- or three-dimensional images are used to simulate a person, a character, or a persona within a game or forum and in which such images may interact with each other. In such cases a person’s “avatar,” the electronic representation of a person in a virtual environment, is sexually harassed or assaulted by another person’s avatar or by a nonplayable character.¹³</p> |
| <p>Tech-facilitated Sexual Coercion</p> | <p>The act of bullying or intimidating another person to create and share sexually explicit or sexualized images of themselves via forms of information communications technology (ICT). Such harassing and coercive activities may be carried out in person, via texting, comments or direct messages on social media platforms, or other technology-based forms of communication.</p> |
| <p>Video Voyeurism (VV)</p> | <p>The surreptitious recording of images or videos of clothed people while engaged in public activities in order to obtain images of their private body parts (e.g., “down blousing,” and “upskirting”) or the recording of persons engaged in private activities (e.g., changing clothes, using the toilet or showering, having sex in private) without their knowledge. This form of IBSA is often referred to popularly as “spycamming.”</p> |

¹² Such practices are also used by adults to extort sexually explicit images from children. Material created by children under such circumstances constitutes CSAM.

¹³ This form of IBSA is sometimes referred to as “cyber rape” or “virtual rape,” however restricting the term to “rape” omits online sexual harassment and other forms of sexual assault happening online.

Computer-Generated IBSA (CG-IBSA) and Artificial Intelligence-Generated IBSA (AI-generated IBSA)

Computer-generated IBSA is sexually explicit or sexualized material generated using any computer technology. It can range from material created by standard software programs (e.g., Photoshop) to machine learning, artificial neural networks, and other AI-related technology.

AI-generated IBSA involves the use of AI-related technology¹⁴ to generate forged or “new” pornography from existing material.

Currently there are two main categories of AI-generated IBSA: 1) forged pornography created by either superimposing an innocuous image of an identifiable person into pre-existing pornography so that one or more persons originally in the pornography are “replaced” with the image of another person, or by the use of “nudifying” apps which strip images of clothed, identifiable persons of their clothing, and 2) AI-generated pornography which utilizes massive collections of images of people scraped from the Internet and AI-related technology to create “new” pornography typically depicting an unidentifiable, AI-generated “person” but which may generate identifiable persons.

AI-Generated Forged Pornography: The forging of pornography, to depict people who have not been filmed or photographed for pornography as if they had, has been practiced for centuries. However, given the limitations of technology, such materials were previously detectable as forgeries. Now, modern advances based on the use of “deepfake” technology yield hyperrealistic images that make detection of AI-generated IBSA exceedingly difficult if not impossible.

By utilizing what is popularly referred to as “deepfake” technology, users may swap images of any person they wish into an existing pornography scene. Thus, people who have not participated in recordings of pornographic acts are technologically sex trafficked into pornography. Many women celebrities, journalists, and politicians have suffered this form of IBSA, and increasingly women (and children¹⁵) who are not famous are also becoming targets of this form of IBSA. In addition to “swapping,” AI-related technology allows for the nudification of clothed persons. Nudifying technology strips images of clothed people so that they appear to be partially or fully naked. Research released in 2023 reported that 98% of AI-generated forged images are of pornography and that 99% of this pornography depicts women.¹⁶

¹⁴ An array of technologies is used in the development of AI including machine learning, deep learning, neural networks, computer vision, and natural language processing. Machine learning and deep learning, subsets of AI, are heavily used in the creation of AI-IBSA.

¹⁵ When such images are created using images of minors, the resulting material constitutes CSAM. Depending on circumstances, such material is prosecutable, as in the case of *United States v. Tatum*. See: FBI, “‘Horribly Twisted’ Charlotte Pornography Case Shows ‘Unsettling’ Reach of AI-generated Imagery,” April 29, 2024, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/charlotte-child-sexual-abuse-material-case-shows-unsettling-reach-of-ai-generated-imagery>.

¹⁶ Home Security Heroes, *2023 State of Deepfakes. Overview of Current State*, <https://www.securityhero.io/state-of-deepfakes/assets/pdf/state-of-deepfake-infographic-2023.pdf>.

Computer-Generated IBSA (CG-IBSA) and Artificial Intelligence-Generated IBSA (AI-generated IBSA)

The appropriation of a person’s image or likeness for the unauthorized production of sexual materials is a form of identity theft, fraud, and sexual violence. It constitutes public sexual humiliation and sexual assault.

AI-Generated New Pornography: By utilizing massive collections of sexually explicit and other images of people scraped from social media, pornography, and other websites (or related metadata obtained via other technology), AI-related technology can be used to create “new” pornography featuring computer-generated “persons.” Such material is formulated based on the training the AI model receives from harvested images of real persons—all obtained without the consent or knowledge of the individuals depicted in the images used for training purposes. In some cases, the datasets used to train AI models are known to have utilized material depicting rape (e.g., pornography of sex trafficking victims), other non-consensually distributed sexually explicit material, and/or CSAM. AI-models are frequently used to generate pornography of presumably *unidentifiable* “people.” However, female celebrities and influential women (reporters, journalists, politicians) have been identifiable victims of AI-generated new pornography because of the vast amounts of visual content depicting these women online. AI-generated pornography perpetrates IBSA on a massive scale by its dependence on nonconsensually obtained material in AI training datasets.



Join Us in the Fight Against Image-Based Sexual Abuse!

Together, we can protect the vulnerable and hold perpetrators accountable. Your support is vital in raising awareness, advocating for stronger protections, and helping survivors rebuild their lives. Join our mission today by getting involved, donating, or spreading the word. Every action counts in the fight to end image-based sexual abuse. Let's create a safer future for all.

