

Semiosis of Revenge Porn: A Study on Gender and Patriarchy in Brazil

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Revenge porn is a crime foreseen in Brazilian law since 2018, characterised as the non-consensual propagation of photos, videos and audios containing sexual content. This act can be done against all kinds of people, but data shows that women are the greatest victims. From this context, we sought to understand, with this research, which signs of patriarchy are present in revenge porn. To answer our research problem, we used the multiple case study methodology and the content analysis methodology. We conclude that revenge porn is a sort of gender violence and there is a stigmatisation and blaming towards female victims, because they do not fulfil social norms designed from their gender.

Keywords. Semiosis, Revenge porn, Gender, Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

In romantic or sexual relationships, there might be the production, reception and circulation of photographic or audiovisual pornographic content. Even though the recording and sending might occur in a consensual way between partners, it is expected that the propagation of this material is equally consented. However, when this material is shared without permission and with the intention to cause shame towards one of the parts, we call this phenomenon revenge porn [1].

The exposition of this material might occur in various media. Still, in the great majority, it occurs in adult content websites and chatting groups, such as WhatsApp. Considering the phenomenon to which we are submitted in our new ambience [2], the sharing of information like this can happen with a gigantic number of users in a very short period.

Parallel to it, it is very important to look at the problem of, for instance, many pornography websites allow users to post videos, without checking if the participants of the material consent. Besides, there is the opportunity to download the material. Therefore, even if the affected person reaches the adult content platform to exclude the video, there are no guarantees that the material will not be posted again by other users who already accessed it.

In current days, the revenge porn phenomenon is recognized as a crime in the Brazilian penal code, through law number 13.718/2018 [3]. From this publication, thus, there was an alteration in article 218, defining it as a crime to offer, exchange, make available, transmit, sell or expose to selling, broadcast, publish or disclose, through any media – including mass communication media or computing or telematic system – photo, video or any other audiovisual register that contain scenes of rape or statutory rape or that makes apology or inducts its practice, or, without victim's consent, scenes of sex, nudity or pornography. The expected penalty is reclusion, from one to five years, if the fact does not constitute a more serious crime, and might be extended from one to two thirds if the crime is committed by an agent that maintains affective intimate relation with the victim or with revengeful or humiliation purpose [1].

The victims, in the majority of cases, either in Brazil or abroad, are women. The average calculated by different researchers results in 80% of cases affecting this part of the population [4]. The consequences that might come from a situation in which revenge porn is practiced are outnumbered. In an article published by Gazeta Online in 2013⁵, women who had intimate images shared were interviewed and reported humiliation in familiar or work environments, even after years of the fact. Other observations are finding that revenge porn

might lead, as well, to a lack of self-confidence, difficulty being in new relationships or to trust in future partners, depression and, in some cases, suicide.

Since the majority of victims of this act are women and the crime, many times, is committed by male-gendered partners or ex-partners, we can comprehend that there is a gender-based violence. To discuss the semiotic senses revenge porn might have, it is necessary to understand gender means and the signs of patriarchy that are reinforced.

2. Methodology

In order to analyze what meanings we can have from revenge porn, relating this attack to the concepts of gender and patriarchy, this article uses the multiple case study methodology, described by Yin [5], and the content analysis methodology, studied by Bardin [6].

Regarding the case study, Yin [5] states that this method is used to broadly and deeply describe social phenomena.

Furthermore, we used content analysis methodology, aiming to understand the discourses commonly associated with attacks against women. Bardin [6] defines this methodology as seeking to know what led to the statement and its understanding.

3. Gender and its signs

What is it to be a woman? What are the characteristics a woman needs to present to be defined as one? This and other questions permeate the research of various social authors from the 1970s, such as Simone de Beauvoir⁸ and Gerda Lerner⁹. It was in this period that biological determinism, in which it was believed that biological sex dictated actions, was substituted by the notion of gender in the studies. According to this new definition, being a man or a woman is a cultural and social construction, adapting as society changes. Thus, the tasks we can perform and/or what is expected to be done, are related to the imposed gender, not with the sex we are born with.

According to Beatriz Accioly Lins [10], gender would be a way of categorizing human actions in two axis, being female and male, "from socially perceived differences, as well as a field from which power is articulated". The author relates the concept with the notion of power, where one gender exercises domination over the other. In the case of a patriarchal context, as it is currently lived, the male gender would be considered superior to the female. This way, the social environment encourages gender-based violence, where, from gender

inequality, it gives men the "right to dominate and control their women, being able to use violence to do so" [11]. We consider it important to emphasize the violence that can be used in this pursuit for control is not always physical, and can be psychological or targeting to affect women's morals.

In the case of revenge porn, there is a margin to various sorts of gender-based violence, such as manipulation, threats and physical aggression, as well as judgments over women's morals and, in some cases, blaming over what happened. Manuela Gatto Santa Rita de Souza¹², contextualizes revenge porn can be seen as a new form of gender-based violence, since it utilizes sexism and taboo over women's sexual desire to attack them.

In a patriarchal society, there are behavioral patterns imposed on women towards their sexual life, such as: not being promiscuous, not having sex with several people, and remaining a virgin until marriage, among others. In this regard, female social value is based on these actions. This way, when a woman is exposed to performing sexual acts, she is going against what is expected from them: holiness.

Souza concludes that

Even in the face of social evolution, the woman remains to be judged when using her sexual freedom, and if exposed to what is done by everybody in their intimacy, she starts suffering social marginalisation, which, due to her vulnerability and inferiority, she is perceived as an unqualified person in society. The man corrupted from the feeling of property over the ex-partner and possession of the crime "weapon" happens to use it as a way of threat and revenge.¹²

The gender inequality may also be seen in the way men are treated when it comes to revenge porn. In some contents, the men's image is also shared (in many cases, by themselves), but the treatment offered to them is different.

To approach this judgment distinction, we are going to use the Semiosis theory, in which the world is translated in signs, or representamen, which, in the definition of Pierce¹³, is what represents something to someone. Besides, the signs would help mediate the men's relationship with the world, as well as we would help in the relation between two or more signs [14].

These communication signs are a part of our daily relations and are very important in maintaining certain beliefs and traditions. For instance, when a woman marries in white, it resembles purity and virginity, which must be present. Priore [15] discusses Barbaza's research in her work. According to her [15] in other social contexts, just by the garment, it was possible to understand if a woman was married or widowed.

Considering these thoughts, we can cross it with the previously presented information about the expected performance of women in a patriarchal society. Once a woman does not encounter the signs of her designated, like maintaining a private sex life (even if the exposition occurs without her consent) or remaining “pure”, avoiding sexual acts, her identity will be disconfigured and reduced to only this.

According to Erving Goffman [16], this phenomenon can be seen as a subject’s stigmatization, in which the stigma works as a barrier. The individuals who have their identity deteriorated are not able to obtain full social acceptance. This concept represents much more than just a social barrier, because it is inserted in a complex information thread, involving social relations among human beings. From the crossing of the concept above with the consequences previously cited and related by victims of porn revenge, it is possible to comprehend that their identities are submitted to a stigmatization process, because the communication signs to which they are submitted were altered from the exposition of their intimacies.

Besides, one of the symptoms that helps to diagnose a stigma situation is when justifications are created so it endures. Relating it to the research object, it is clear that the blame is directed at the victim, because they are the subject of hatry and estrangement when, hardly, there is such a shaming look over the aggressor. With that said, we bring the following thoughts:

Given the exposition, contemporary society and its cultural look tends to blame the victim who had their privacy exposed, forgets the crime of violation to intimacy itself, and with invalid argument, even comes to protect the conduct’s author and, in consequence, move away of the consequence.¹²

4. Conclusion

We can conclude, in this way, there is a long journey semiosis in question, where signs that reinforce patriarchal ideas are designed when a content exposition of revenge porn occurs. To the men that show or share the content, there are no judgments or they are exalted by affirming their identity as “alpha males”. To the women, it only remains blaming, stigmatizing and moral judgment by not following the signs them designed for their gender.

To accomplish a deconstruction of this current universe of signs, it is necessary to reinforce the complaints and punishment of crimes like revenge porn. It is important to remind that, if we mention a long-term semiotics process, we have to understand that it is only possible from communication and media apparatus that reinforce it. It is, therefore, a collective interest to perform daily work to report,

deconstruct and communicate messages that build a fair society among the involved ones.

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