

# Online Sexual Violence: Prevalence, Characterization, and Potential Risk Factors for Victimization in a Sample of Portuguese Adult Population

Filipa Romeiras<sup>1\*</sup>, Luís Querido<sup>1,2</sup>, Telma C. Almeida<sup>1,2</sup> & Jorge Cardoso<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>\*Egas Moniz School of Health & Science, Caparica, Almada, Portugal;  
\*filiparomeiras.psic clinica@gmail.com

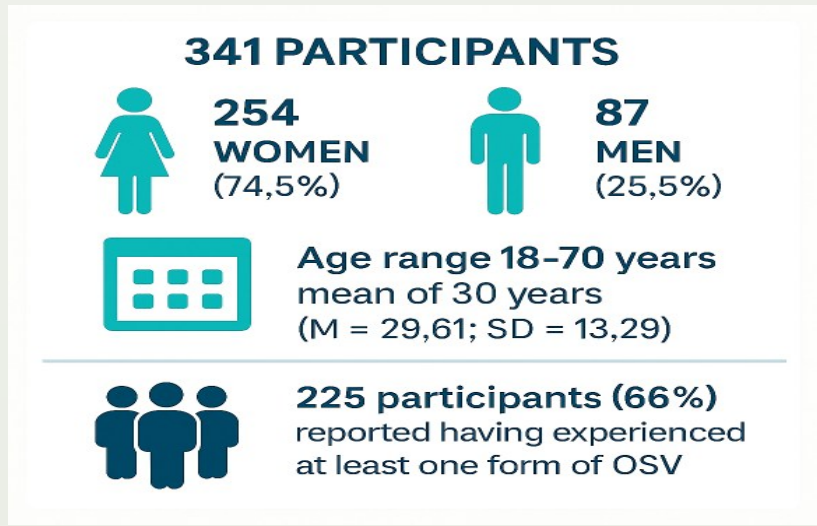
<sup>2</sup>\*Egas Moniz Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (CiEM); Egas Moniz School of Health and Science, Caparica, Almada, Portugal

## Introductuion

With technological evolution, aggressive behaviors have increasingly moved from the real to the virtual world. That included sexual violence (SV), referred as Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV) [1] and known as Online Sexual Violence (OSV) in the Portuguese context. OSV is categorized into digital sexual harassment, image-based sexual abuse, sexual assault/coercion, and gender/sexuality-based harassment [1]. Researchers contend that OSV is underreported due to multiple factors intrinsic to the online context (e.g., anonymity, false identities) [2] [3]. Between 56.1% and 85% of people have experienced OSV [4] [5]. Some studies characterize the phenomenon as generalized, not affecting only a specific group of individuals [6] [7], while others show higher risk for women, LGBTQ+, nonconforming traditional gender roles individuals [8] [9] and youth [4] [6]. Digital sexual harassment is the most common OSV behaviors reported and the less is assault/coercion abuse [1] [10] and aggressors are predominantly male and unknown to the victim [1] [4]. Some victimization risk factors were described as younger age, non-heterosexuality, liberal sexual attitudes and high internet/social media use [4] [11] [12]. Research also indicates that cyberstalking is correlated with OSV victimization through obsessive sexual or relational pursuits [3].

Due to limited data, OSV is often underestimated and poorly understood. The present study aims to describe OSV in a sample of the Portuguese adult population, specifically regarding its prevalence, characterization, and potential victimization risk factors.

## Methods



**Instruments:** Sociodemographic and habits of internet use questionnaires, Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence Scale, Cyberstalking Assessment Scale, External and Internal Shame Scale

**Procedure:** TFSV-VS [1] were translated into European Portuguese and subsequently back-translated into English and the translated version was administered to a small pilot sample. A cross-sectional, empirical, and correlational research design, prior approved from the Scientific Committee and the Ethics Committee of Egas Moniz School of Health & Science. Data was collected using a protocol disseminated online, snowball method.

## Results

**Groups comparisons (victims,  $n=225$  and non-victim  $n=116$ ):**

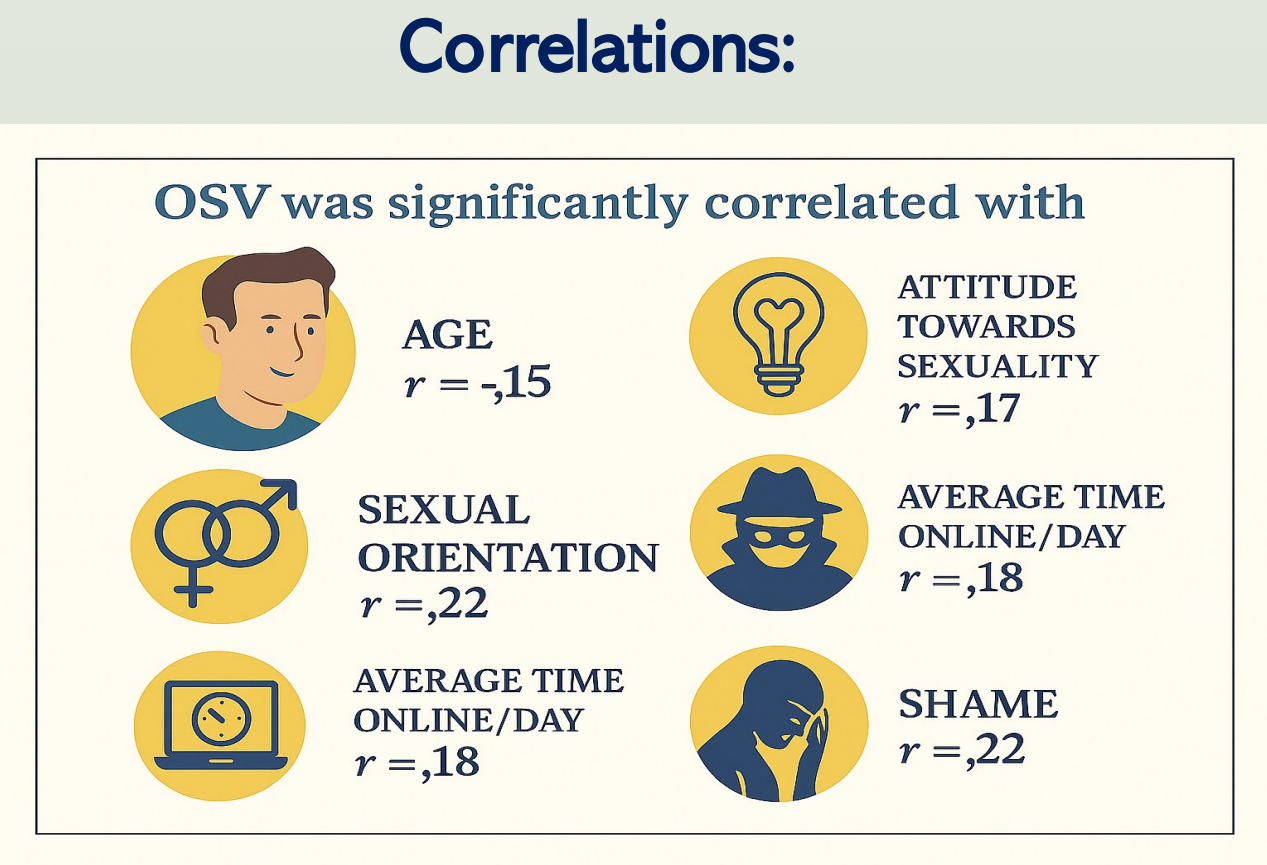
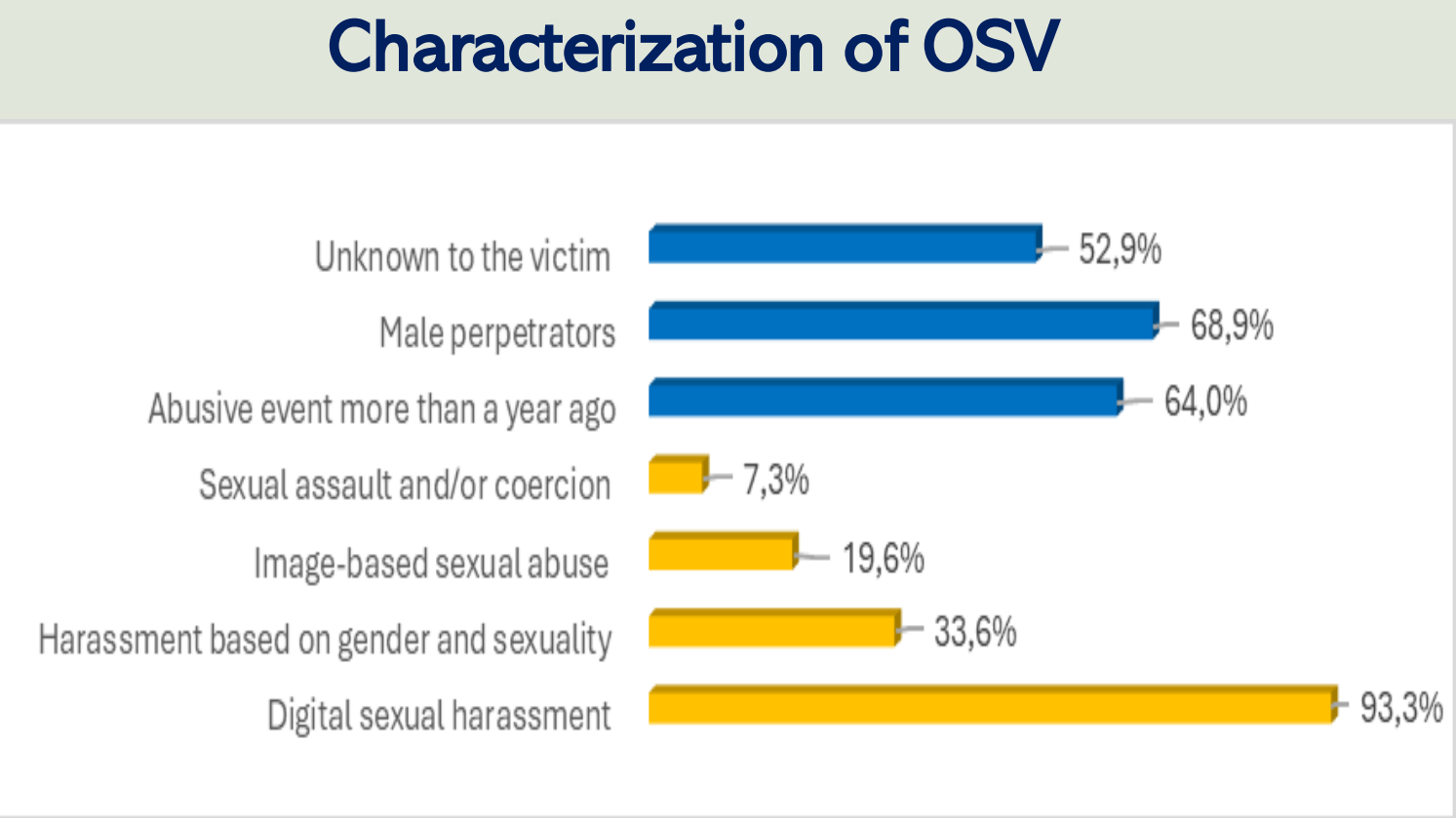
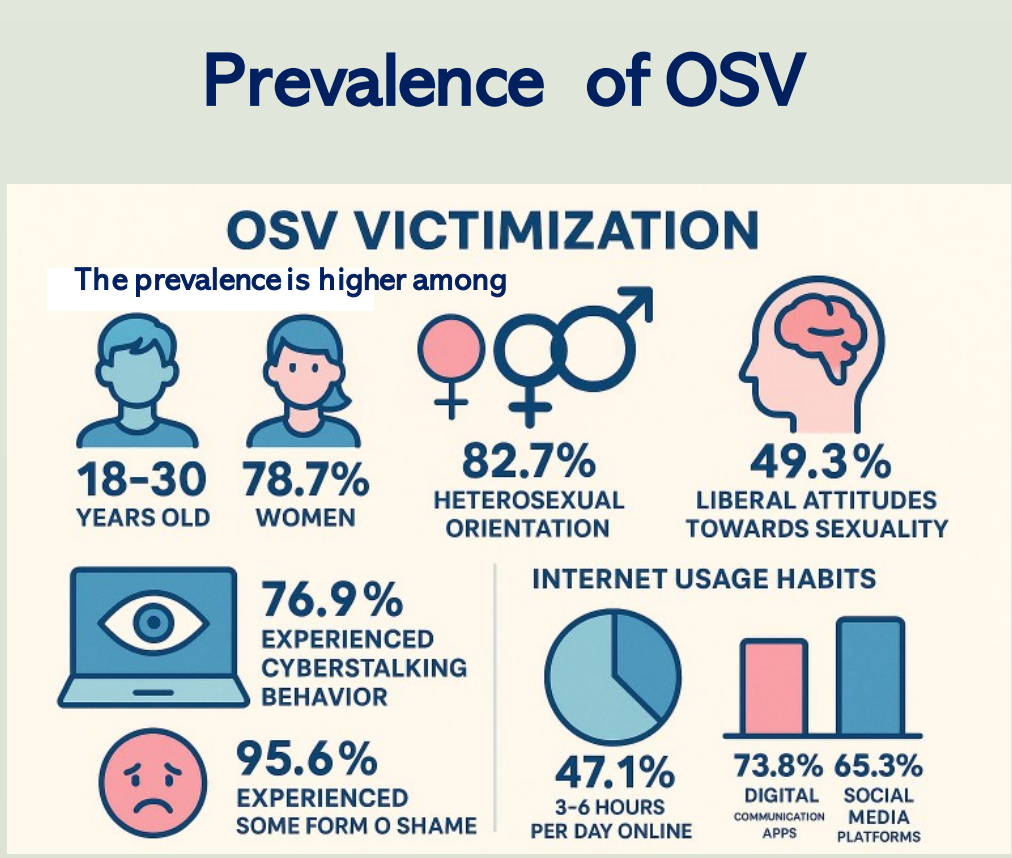
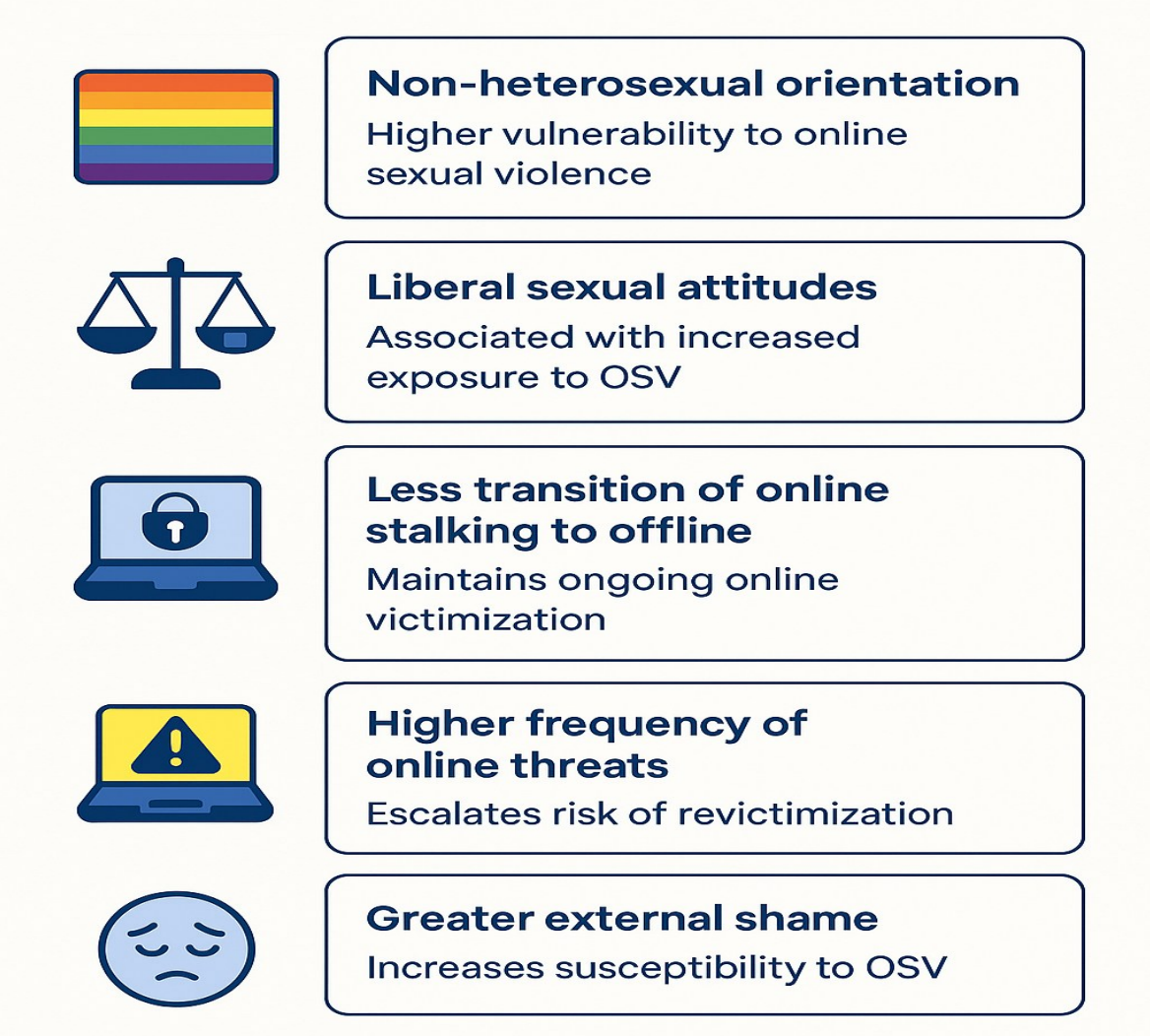
**Demographic characteristics:** gender [ $t(339) = 2.34, p = .02$ ], with a greater number of female victims (81.1%) and sexual orientation [ $t(329) = -4.48, p < .001$ ], with a higher percentage of non-heterosexual victims compared to non-victims and more heterosexual non-victims **Psychosocial characteristics::** attitude towards sexuality [ $t(339) = -3.08, p = .003$ ], with a higher incidence of liberal individuals being victims of OSV, cyberstalking [ $t(301) = -8.21, p < .001$ ] and shame [ $t(233) = -4.65, p < .001$ ], presenting both conditions with higher values in the group of victims. **Internet usage habits:** average time spent online per day [ $t(339) = -2.59, p = .01$ ], with a tendency for victims to spend more hours per day online compared to non-victims.

**Within the group of victims:** The majority of women (74.6%) were aged between 18 and 30 and men (47.9%) between 31 and 50. A greater number of women identified themselves as non-heterosexual (18.6%), tending to be liberal (51.4%), spending between 3 and 6 hours a day online (52.4%) or more and as very frequent users of social networks/media (70.1%), compared to men.

**Regression Analyses:** The results of the regression analyses revealed that **sexual orientation** ( $\beta = .43, p < .001$ ); **attitude towards sexuality** ( $\beta = .48, p = .002$ );

Cyberstalking as **real-life transfer** ( $\beta = -.22, p = .001$ )/**threat** ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ) and **external shame** ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ) were significant **predictors of OSV**, explaining 42% of the phenomenon variance ( $R^2 = .42$ )

### Potential Victimization Risk Factors:



## Discussion

The study found that patterns of technology use and digital communication in Portugal resemble those observed globally regarding online sexual violence, with results largely consistent with current scientific literature [4] [9] [13]. When comparing victims and non-victims, no significant differences emerged in terms of age or gender, suggesting that OSV may affect Portuguese adults equally as noted in the literature [1] [6] [7]. However, the overrepresentation of younger and female participants may have contributed to higher victimization rates within these groups. Liberal sexual attitudes and greater daily internet use were associated with increased victimization risk, corroborated by frequency analyses, indicating that higher online exposure and permissive sexual attitudes may amplify OSV vulnerability. Female victims were generally younger, more often non-heterosexual, held more liberal sexual attitudes, spent more time online, and used social media more than male victims. These patterns, align with literature showing that younger individuals [6], those outside binary gender norms [8] [14], people with liberal sexual attitudes and women [12] face greater OSV vulnerability. These factors may help explain the higher OSV victimization rates reported by Portuguese women in this study. The characterization of OSV among Portuguese adults revealed patterns largely consistent with international literature (dominant abusive behavior was digital sexual harassment; the perpetrator mostly identified as male and unknown to the victim). However, the anonymity and false identity probability may bias these perceptions. Analyses identified potential victimization risk factors, such as non-heterosexual orientation, likely due to their status as a minority group vulnerable to discrimination; liberal sexual attitudes, which may potentially be explained by a lower resistance to new sexual experiences, leaving the individual more exposed to victimization; higher external shame, probably because it arises from negative beliefs about how others perceive individuals, leading them to seek approval and repair damaged image, which can be exploited by abusers; high levels of online threats, which may suggests greater submission due to fear and reduced transfer of cyberstalking to offline mode increasing exposure in digital contexts. Although age, gender and internet habits have not been identified as predictors, their association with higher OSV incidence suggests they may constitute relevant OSV victimization risk factors among Portuguese adults. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the problem of OSV in the national context, providing scientific evidence that could enhance prevention and intervention strategies in the context of victimization by OSV.

## References:

[1] - Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2016). Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence Victimization: Results from an Online Survey of Australian Adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(17), 3637–3665. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516672055>

[2] Bates, S. (2017). Revenge Porn and Mental Health: A Qualitative Analysis of the Mental Health Effects of Revenge Porn on Female Survivors. *Feminist Criminology*, 12(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085116654565>

[3] Kim, S., Choi, E., & Champion, J. D. (2024). Technology-facilitated Sexual Violence in South Korea: A Content Analysis of a Website for Victims. *Violence Against Women*, 30(11), 3077–3090. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012231172712>

[4] Monteiro, R., Grangeia, H., Santos, A. (2024). Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: Victimization and Risk Factors, *Social Sciences* 13: 372. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13070372>

[5] Orsolini L, Yilmaz-Karaman I G, Selvi K, Reina S, Longo G & Volpe U (2024). Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence Among Italian Youths: Validation of the Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence Victimization Scale. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 15:1449183. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2024.1449183>

[6] Näsl, M., Räsänen, P., Kaakinen, M., Keipi, T., & Oksanen, A. (2017). Do routine activities help predict young adults' online harassment: A multi-nation study. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 17(4), 418–432. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895816679866>

[7] Patel, U., & Roesch, R. (2022). The Prevalence of Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: A Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review. In *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* (Vol. 23, Issue 2, pp. 428–443). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020958057>

[8] Backe, E. L., Lilleston, P., & McCleary-Sills, J. (2018). Networked Individuals, Gendered Violence: A Literature Review of Cyberviolence. *Violence and Gender*, 5(3), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0056>

[9] Martinez-Bacaicoa, J., Alonso-Fernández, M., Wachs, S., & Gámez-Guadix, M. (2023). Prevalence and Motivations for Technology-facilitated Gender- and Sexuality-based Violence Among Adults: A Mixed-methods Study. *Sex Roles*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-023-01412-7>

[10] Champion, A., Oswald, F., & Pedersen, C. L. (2021). Technology-facilitated sexual violence and suicide risk: A serial mediation model investigating bullying, depression, perceived burdensomeness, and thwarted belongingness. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 30(1), 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.3138/CJHS.2020-0044>

[11] Douglass, C. H., Wright, C. J. C., Davis, A. C., & Lim, M. S. C. (2018). Correlates of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment from an online survey among young Australians. *Sexual Health*, 15(4), 361–365. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH17208>

[12] Salerno-Ferraro, A. C., Erentzen, C., & Schuller, R. A. (2022). Young Women's Experiences with Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence from Male Strangers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(19–20), NP17860–NP17885. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211030018>

[13] Snaychuk, L. A., & O'Neill, M. L. (2020). Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: Prevalence, Risk, and Resiliency in Undergraduate Students. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*, 29(8), 984–999. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926773.2019.1710636>

[14] Klemmer, K., Neill, D. B., & Jarvis, S. A. (2021). Understanding spatial patterns in rape reporting delays. *Royal Society Open Science*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.201795>