



# Kent Academic Repository

**Mort, Helen, Morris, Rosie, Mark-Lawson, Rebecca, Pina, Afroditi, Nitsche, Daria, Maleney, Clair and Simmonds, Vera (2023) *OKRE Final Report: My Blonde GF*. Project report. OKRE**

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/114828/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://okre.org/articles/my-blonde-gf-okre-fund/>

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

# OKRE Final Report

## My Blonde GF



Submitted March 2023

Tyke Films

# CONTENTS

Contents	1
Executive Summary	2
Introduction	3
Updates	4
Collaborators	5
Narrative	7
Process	8
Analysis of Learnings	8
1. Ethics cannot be separated from process	8
2. Safeguarding is essential, and best practice develops through broad consultation	10
3. Consent allows for the creation of safe discomfort – which supports difficult conversations and artistic practice	12
4. Process can be a tool for empowerment	14
5. Without an ethical framework, media discourse and treatment of victims of image-based abuse recreate the original trauma	15
6. For this project, the use of Deepfake technology was inappropriate and detracted from the narrative, but selective special effects did augment the psychological uneasiness.	17
7. We determined that the most powerful impact for this film would be to give audiences the realisation “this could happen to anyone, this could happen to me” and to minimise the distance between the audience and Helen’s experience.	19
Conclusion	21



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This final report considers the development process and learnings from the OKRE supported MY BLONDE GF project. It details the knowledge produced through the collaboration between Rosie Morris, Helen Mort, Dr Afroditi Pina, Tyke Films, and Absolute Post.

The report begins with the seven development aims created to develop MY BLONDE GF, and discusses the seven learnings which came out of this process which are:

1. Ethics cannot be separated from process
2. Safeguarding is essential, and best practice develops through broad consultation
3. Consent allows for the creation of safe discomfort – which supports difficult conversations and artistic practice
4. Process can be a tool for empowerment
5. The discourse and treatment of victims of image-based abuse by the media can recreate the original trauma
6. For this project, the use of Deepfake technology was inappropriate and detracted from the narrative
7. We determined that the most powerful impact for this film would be minimise the distance between the audience and Helen's experience for the purpose of encouraging digital literacy

The report contains a brief introduction, a list of collaborators, the list of development aims, and a narrative discussion of the learnings through the collaborative process. It concludes with recommendations for other practitioners, and poses questions for further enquiry.



## INTRODUCTION

With OKRE's support, we developed MY BLONDE GF, a project to explore and convey the mental health impact of image-based abuse through an investigation of the lived experience of poet and writer Helen Mort.

This investigation was conducted through a collaborative investigative process between Helen Mort, Rosie Morris, Dr Afroditi Pina, Tyke Films, and Absolute Post.

In this research process, the participants explored Helen Mort's lived experience of image based sexual abuse. We investigated the emotional, social and health effects it had for her, as well as the ramifications that deepfake technology and image-based abuse has in our society.

This development work allowed for time for all participants to understand the Deepfake process. It also enabled us to build an ethical framework and practice which supported the participants by practicing safeguarding and informed consent.



## UPDATES

Since our interim report there have been a few changes

- Pr. Clare McGlynn informed us that she believed her experience would not be helpful for us in the final stages of development as she is very focused on legal aspects. It became clear to us that focusing on the legal implications was a distraction from discussing the impact.
- Pr. McGlynn has connected us to Glitch Media, who are actively campaigning around the topic of digital literacy. She believed this organisation would be a better fit moving forward.
- The film has been completed and has been submitted to a number of film festivals.



## COLLABORATORS

[Helen Mort](#) is an award-winning author based in Sheffield. She has published three poetry collections (*Division Street*, 2013 and *No Map Could Show Them*, 2016) and her latest, *The Illustrated Woman* (2022) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize. She has written a novel (*Black Car Burning*, 2019), a short story collection (*Exire*, 2019) and she also writes drama and creative nonfiction.

Her first full length non-fiction book, *A Line Above the Sky* (Ebury, 2022) was featured in the Guardian and Evening Standard's 'books to watch' lists. She has been shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and Costa Prize and won the Fenton Aldeburgh Prize in 2015. She appears regularly on BBC radio and sometimes on TV. She has taught creative writing for over ten years and is a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University. She offers freelance mentoring and runs workshops. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

She is a mum to a toddler, a step parent, a trail runner, climber and all-round outdoor enthusiast. She grew up in Chesterfield and loves dogs, books, dancing and real ale.

[Rosie Morris](#) graduated from the National Film and Television school in February 2020. Empathy, conversation, and collaboration are at the heart of her process. She prioritises intimacy and emotion to make films that are grounded in everyday experience, but psychologically complex and emotionally charged. She aims to bring the audience into the world of the film to meet the people in it at eye level. In 2020, her film [HEART EYES AND A WORLD](#) was part of the Official Selection at Aesthetica Short Film Festival and a finalist in the 16 Days and 16 Films competition, hosted by Modern Films and the Kering Foundation. Her NFTS graduation film TREES had its world premiere in the New Talent competition at FIPADOC International Documentary Festival, was nominated in the David L Wolper student documentary category at the 2021 International Documentary Awards (IDA). Trees screened at Otherfield festival in July 2021, and you can watch it on watchargo.com

[Dr Afroditi Pina](#) is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology, Chair of the University Harassment Contact Network. Dr Pina conducts research in forensic and social psychology on the broad areas of sexual violence, gender equality and victimisation.

[Professor Clare McGlynn](#) is a Professor of Law at Durham University with particular expertise in the legal regulation of pornography, image-based sexual abuse (including 'revenge porn' and 'upskirting') and sexual violence. She qualified as a solicitor with City firm Herbert Smith Freehills and in 2020 was

appointed an Honorary KC in recognition of her work championing equality for women in the legal profession and shaping new criminal laws on extreme pornography and image-based sexual abuse.

**Absolute Post** is a team of storytellers and visionaries who thrive on exceptional collaborations. Experienced in all aspects of post-production including CGI, visual effects, and state of the art technologies. Working with Ben Robards, Sally Heath, Rick, Tom, and Rebecca they are pushing the boundaries of deepfake technology, and giving the rest of the participants an in depth look into how this technology works. They will demonstrate how the technology works in reverse order to give us an understanding of what was done to Helen's images. They have helped us develop a method to represent and communicate the emotional experience which Helen underwent to an audience.

**Tyke Films** is a BFI Vision Award winning Film, TV, and VR Production Company. Their projects are drawn from left-field sources and less represented geographies and communities. Led by Rebecca Mark-Lawson, they aim to make a bold contribution to the UK filmmaking landscape by working with ambitious storytellers pushing form and content.

**Rebecca Mark-Lawson** is an experienced Producer whose career began working extensively in production with the likes of Penny Woolcock and Ken Loach, and as Development Executive for new talent at EM Media. Working on titles including *Dead Man's Shoes*, *This Is England*, Michael Winterbottom's *Cock and Bull Story*, Anton Corbin's *Control*, Duane Hopkin's *Better Things* and Keith Fulton, Lois Pepe and Tony Grisoni's *Brother of the Head*. Then as Managing Executive at Lifesize Pictures, she delivered new talent schemes for the UK Film Council including Directors Lab, Cinema Extreme, and 4Mations.

Her most recent feature *Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché* received international acclaim, playing at over 50 festivals worldwide and being released in Europe, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia as well as winning Best Documentary and Raindance Discovery Award at the BIFAs and Grand Prix at FAME Festival.

**Daria Nitsche** is a multi-award-winning Producer from Germany who started her career working on programmes for Germany's leading broadcaster ZDF, as well as global TV and cinema commercials.

In 2008 she received a Master's degree in Film and Media Production and worked on scripted films, documentaries, commercials and marketing films for companies such as Netflix and Channel 4 News. Over the years she has gained a vast network of industry professionals, which has given her the opportunity to be involved in German, English, Italian, Spanish, American and Nigerian productions.

In 2019 she joined BFI Vision Award-winning company Tyke Films, where she produced BIFA winning and BAFTA Scotland nominated films, such as *POLY STYRENE: I AM A CLICHÉ*, featuring Oscar nominee Ruth Negga as the voice of Poly Styrene. The film also played at top tier festivals such as SXSW, Rotterdam, HotDocs and CPH:Dox, and sold out multiple screenings in the US, been certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes and was chosen as The New York Times Critics' Pick.

**Clair Maleney** is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and producer. In 2020, she was selected for a placement at Tyke Films through the Screen Industries Growth Network. Whilst at Tyke Films, she was selected for a BFI funded Trainee Producer role on animated short *Plunge*. She is also co-producing Guardian and BFI short documentary *My Blonde GF*, developed with the support of OKRE. She holds joint Masters degrees with honours in the fields of International Relations and Cultural Anthropology.

**Vera Simmonds** has a Masters in Editing from the National Film and Television School, and short films that she has edited have been selected for festivals, including Cannes Film Festival, Annecy Animation Festival, Sheffield Doc Fest, London Short Film Festival and East End Film Festival. *The Bigger Picture* has enjoyed much festival success and been nominated for an OSCAR, as well as winning the 2015 BAFTA for Best Short Animation. She is a visiting tutor at the National Film and Television School, and the editing tutor on the MFA Creative Documentary by Practice at UCL.



## NARRATIVE

### Development Aims

When we began the development process for MY BLONDE GF, we created a list of development aims for the project:

- 1) Develop an understanding of Helen's lived experience and the mental health impacts for her.
- 2) Develop an ethical framework for the project.
- 3) Develop an understanding of how to discuss the manipulated images, and do so in a way that is ethical and empowering.
- 4) Explore how to use deepfake technology to tell the story, and do so in a way that is ethical and empowering.
- 5) Develop an in-depth understanding of deepfake technology and determine how to employ it to tell the story.
- 6) Develop an understanding of what this technology and Helen's experience means within a larger context of society.
- 7) Consider the potential impact of this film to the work being done to raise awareness around image-based abuse in the UK.

### Defining Terms

Before continuing, it is important to ensure a working understanding of certain terms which will feature in this report.

*Image-based sexual abuse:* when someone shares sexually explicit images or videos of another person without their consent, and with the aim of causing them distress or harm.

It refers to materials that are shared both online and offline, and includes uploading images to the internet and social media channels, sharing by text and email, and showing someone a physical or electronic image or video. It is a catch-all term which includes revenge porn, up-skirting, non-consensual deepfake pornography, and more.

*Deepfake:* An image video of a person in which their face or body has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else, typically used maliciously or to spread false information.

*Informed Consent:* one of the founding principles of research ethics. It requires permission granted to be given with full knowledge of the possible consequences.

*Ethical Framework:* a set of principles and values that provide a solid foundation for safe and ethical practice. Ethical frameworks are perspectives useful for reasoning what course of action may provide the most moral outcome.

*Safeguarding:* action that is taken to promote welfare and protect from harm.

*Trauma:* the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event.

*Re-traumatisation:* the reactivation of trauma symptoms via thoughts, memories, or feelings related to past traumatic experience.

## Process

The development process for this project has been an ongoing and collaborative process which has run concurrently with the production of the film. Because ethical choices were required throughout the entirety of the process, we were delighted to have the support from OKRE which allowed us to continually consult with our experts. These ongoing conversations with the practitioners and our participant gave us a rich and practical development process. It helped us produce a film about Helen's traumatic lived experience through a process which was based on a strong ethical framework geared towards ensuring Helen was safe and felt heard, supported, and empowered.

## Analysis of Learnings

This section of the report will detail the learnings which have come from working towards the development aims of the project. The method for arriving at these learnings has been an ongoing iterative analytic process of conversation, soliciting feedback from collaborators and adjusting as needed.

### 1. Ethics cannot be separated from process

As we began the development process for this project, we knew we needed a strong ethical framework which could underly our work, and to which we could return as needed when challenges arose. This framework consisted of two primary ideas. Firstly, we wanted to ensure we would be representing Helen's experience without letting the experience define Helen. Secondly, we needed to ensure our actions would not re-traumatise or re-victimise Helen. The framework we came up with was action-oriented and can be

summarised with the idea “ethics cannot be separated from process.” We took an iterative approach to decision making in dialog with Helen and with Dr Pina, discussing each stage of the process, asking for concerns, making alterations.

There were different perspectives on this process due to the different roles of our collaborators, these have been separated out below to provide greater clarity.

#### *Dr Afroditi Pina*

Dr Pina stated from the outset that the most important ethical considerations should be safeguarding and Helen’s wellbeing. She emphasised ensuring that the conditions were right so that Helen could advocate for herself, and had enough information to make informed choices and give informed consent.

When she first heard about the project, Dr Pina was concerned that Helen might not understand how damaging speaking about the experience could be for her mental health. As someone who studies image-based abuse and trauma, she understands that media attention can lead to re-traumatisation. She insisted that an emphasis should be put on safeguarding and giving Helen the opportunity to set boundaries and to “do it in her own time, in a different space or whatever is comfortable.”

The production team heard her concerns, and reflected these ideas back to Helen. We repeatedly encouraged her to take breaks as needed, to only say what she felt comfortable sharing, and we put in place measures to ensure that she was in full control of the images when they were being discussed.

#### *Rosie Morris*

MY BLONDE GF director Rosie Morris said that her ethical method was to ask herself “How can you walk alongside this person through this experience? How could you meet her at eye level?” She wanted to create a project which did not explain or dictate Helen’s lived experience, but rather responded to it.

In this way, every creative choice made in the film the came from this ethically responsive position. One example of this was the decision to not show the manipulated images in the film. This was a “no brainer” for our team, but as Rosie points out, it also shaped her directorial choices. “How do you make a film about images without using the images? How can we get into Helen's shoes while we are talking about this subject matter? Could she describe looking at the images of herself, and we will imagine looking at ourselves in that way?” This desire to ensure that the audience would walk *with* Helen throughout the film guided her ethical choices in the editing process as well.

#### *Helen Mort*

The ethical framework guided both the production and creative choices made throughout the film. As the participant, Helen felt this attention to safeguarding and ethical responsibility.

She reflected, “It's so emotional, because it takes me back to the beginning and to the first conversations that me and Rosie had, which are so easy to lose sight of. And I know that I will always feel so proud of the project. I didn't make it. It's not like being proud of a book or something that you've crafted, but I kind of feel proud that we've done this, and I always will. I'll always feel like that and excited for people to see it, which is almost paradoxical with a topic like this.”

*Rebecca Mark Lawson*

As a producer of many films, Rebecca is aware of what a rare opportunity it is to approach a film with so much space. Too often there are time and budget pressures which can mean decisions are made with little reflection.

Reflecting on MY BLONDE GF, she commented, “It was a genuine collaboration in terms of the way we designed the music, the shots, the style, and the things we shot. We brought in things Helen likes doing, like swimming and it felt like we got to know Helen and that seeped right through the whole film.” In this way the project was able to reflect Helen’s experience through more than the narrative.

## 2. Safeguarding is essential, and best practice develops through broad consultation

From the beginning we knew that speaking about the images could potentially re-start the cycle of abuse by the original or copycat perpetrators. Working with Dr Pina we quickly came to understand that this was not so much a possibility, but a likelihood. She warned that talking about the images would lead people to seek them out. For that reason, she emphasised that prioritising safeguarding was crucial to limit the potential harm to Helen.

She advised, “What you do not want is for this to repeat. That is the nasty aspect of this type of crime is it does not go away. [The images] do not go away and other people can get hold of [the images] and then they can make [the trauma] reappear for you.”

Helen had consented to the project. However, we needed to underline for her the likelihood of copycats. We needed to be sure she understood the risks, to ensure she was giving informed consent. Though we could never have foreknowledge of what the ramifications of the project would be for her, working with Dr Pina gave us far more insight that we would have had without her support.

Helen reflected, “Throughout the process, telling the story always felt important... I had a sense of what an opportunity it was to work with all of you and to tell the story differently.”



Figure 1: Film Still - Helen reads to her child in bed

The topic which became most important in our conversations about safeguarding was the presence of Helen’s child in the film.

It became clear to Rosie in early development discussions that for Helen, her relationship with her child was a very important part of her lived experience.

One of the most devastating

impacts of the experience for Helen was becoming unable to be present with her child due to the anxiety caused by the image-based abuse. Neglecting to include this in the film would mean erasing an important part of Helen’s experience, which could lead to re-traumatisation.

Dr Pina was very concerned about the inclusion of the child, for their safety in the future. She stated, “They’ll contact Helen these keyboard warriors, and she’s aware that that is what people do. But when there is someone else who cannot consent in the picture, there is a clear safeguarding issue. Is this child going to be unsafe because their mother now is recognisable? Will someone online be able to know where they go to school? Will the child’s friends know about it? Is there something identifiable that could put this child in danger immediately? Is there something that could make their life difficult or cause further psychological harm? It’s really crucial to consider this because it’s a child. He can’t consent to this, but obviously he’s already been affected by what Helen went through.”

This is an excellent example of the reason that our framework was successful. It did not rely on one understanding of ethics. Rosie reflected that her empathy had created an “ethical blind spot” around the question of filming Helen’s child. She initially felt that including the child was very important and the child’s identity should not be censored. However, by the end of the process through discussions with collaborators she felt that concealing their identity was the correct choice. She reflected that it was important “having a rigorous process and ways to measure every decision.” She reflected, “For me, this

represents the opportunity of OKRE's support. It gave us the resources to interrogate things. It's been a really good and supportive experience."

Through discussions with our collaborators we were able to find a middle ground which prioritised safeguarding but did not erase Helen's experience. We have Helen's child's presence in the film without including their face or any recognisable details. The child has a different last name from Helen, which limits the chance for strangers to connect them. Finally, we edited the audio to change any instance where Helen said her child's name, so that she instead says "my son."

In the end all collaborators were pleased with the compromise which prioritised safeguarding, but also kept the child's presence in the film.

### 3. Consent allows for the creation of safe discomfort – which supports difficult conversations and artistic practice

One of the most challenging aspects of the project was how to create a space in which Helen could feel safe to discuss the manipulated images. We needed Helen to tell us about discovering the images, what she felt when she saw the images, and what the experience had been like for her. More than just telling us, we needed to see her feel those emotions.

As Dr Pina emphasised, evoking those emotions and experiences again would be a high risk for re-traumatisation. We needed to have this conversation in a way that prioritised Helen's wellbeing. The absolute minimum threshold for success would be to avoid re-traumatising Helen. The highest goal was that we could empower Helen through the experience of discussing these images and her feelings about them with us because she could feel truly seen and heard.

Working with Dr Pina and the production team we engineered a set up using an Eye-Direct device, which ensured that only Helen could see the manipulated images, and when she looked at them, she appeared to be looking directly down the camera lens.



Figure 2: Behind the scenes - Eye Direct set up

We also made sure that there was a good deal of time before and after shooting this scene for Helen to prepare and to recover. We reiterated that she could take a break at any point, and she could always stop, or refuse to answer a question.

Helen described this experience saying, “The only major thing [about the process] that obviously I didn't enjoy was filming the Eye-Direct scene where I was describing the images. I remember that being quite a hard morning. [The production team] been really thoughtful about when we did that and the setup around it which really helped. It was definitely draining. And it's led to some great footage, and it was a really good decision.”

Through an awareness of how difficult the experience would be for Helen, we were able to build parameters which ensured she felt safe and supported. These parameters allowed Helen to feel safe enough to explore the uncomfortable topic of the manipulated images in a vulnerable way. As she explained, “In the Eye-direct

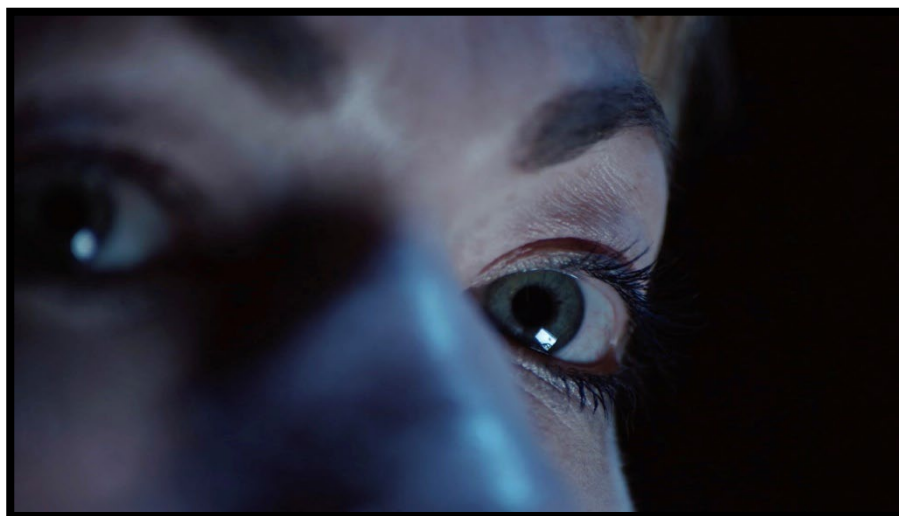


Figure 3: Film still - evoking the feeling of being watched

scene, it needed to make me feel a bit uncomfortable because that needed to be part of the final artistic product.” As a poet she understands that sometimes you need to access emotions through a side route. She felt that we had done a good job of “artificially creating some of that feeling of being watched and scrutinised,” through the camera set up. She pointed out that to make art “you balance all these things. Obviously, you wouldn't have wanted to make me have some kind of meltdown or whatever...You create safe parameters in which to then do something uncomfortable. And it had to be uncomfortable to be asked about the experience. Otherwise, it would have just been a nice chat and there would be no tension in that. It wouldn't have been true to the experience.”

This observation from Helen helped Dr Pina unlock an understanding about a key difference between her own research around image-based abuse, and the approach this film took. She said “When I watched the footage, I was coming from a research perspective. And from that perspective, I know about your experience. I have read about your experience. I examine it in questionnaires. I have spoken with victims before. I've seen all of this. But there was something about this approach that made it come alive again for me, as if I was watching something for the first time. I felt your experience. And I thought, ‘Oh, I see. I see what they're trying to do here.’ Now I understand it.”

By bringing an artistic approach, we were able to offer a new perspective to the material that Dr Pina researches every day. The benefits of this artistic approach were not immediately clear to her, because she worried that they could lead to re-traumatisation.

Because she felt she was in a safe environment, Helen could re-experience some of the difficult emotions again, but with a sense of empowerment and control. The initial strong warning from Dr Pina ensured that we were very serious in our approach. The outcome of this was a powerful interview and an empowering experience for Helen.

#### 4. Process can be a tool for empowerment

We always wanted the process to be empowering for Helen, but we did not realise what a direct impact the experience would have. Helen shared a story with us which shows how this process empowered her to set boundaries around speaking about the experience moving forward.

About 6 months after the interview for this film, Helen was approached by another production that wanted to include her experience in a documentary about deepfake image-based abuse. She stated in writing that she would take part



*Figure 4: Behind the scenes - the final scene from the film of Helen swimming was inspired by Helen's love of the outdoors, climbing, wild swimming and being in nature. The expansive landscape seemed to act as a hopeful counterpoint to the dark & claustrophobic world of the internet that she had been drawn into.*

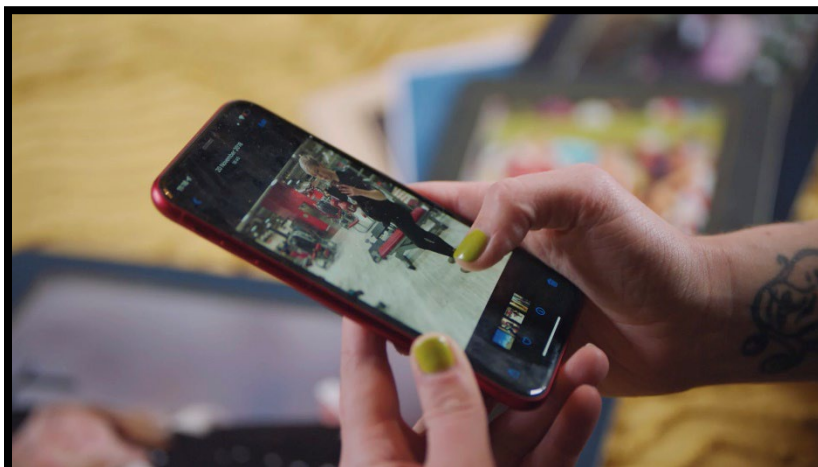
but did not want to share the manipulated images with the production team.

The crew arrived and set up in her house. Shortly after beginning the interview, the producers began pressuring her to show them the images. She said no, but they continued to push. Helen recalled “They said, ‘Oh, but it’ll really help the audience to see them. Why don’t you go and have a think about it now?’ I felt like I had to say, ‘Oh, well, okay.’ I did my kind of default thing, which would be ‘Oh, yes, anything you need, blah blah.’ I left the room, having said, ‘Well, I guess so.’ And then came back into the room and said, ‘No, get out of my house.’ And interestingly, I don’t know if I would have had the strength to do this if I hadn’t already gone through the MY BLONDE GF process talking about the experience where I felt like I was in charge and I was supported.”

Though it would be impossible to re-create these exact conditions for any other victim, we do believe that there is power in being heard, seen and respected. The general prevalence of victim blaming and shaming in our society perpetuates the abuse of the initial experience.

5. Without an ethical framework, media discourse and treatment of victims of image-based abuse recreate the original trauma

Unfortunately, the incident described above has not been a one-time experience. Helen has been harassed by numerous journalists who demand to see the manipulated images of her and do not take her refusal seriously. Helen says she feels “a stab or a rush of adrenaline” anytime she sees the icon of the final film in which she chose not to participate.



*Figure 5: Film still - Helen looks at the originals of some of the images that were manipulated by the perpetrator.*

Dr Pina emphasises that too often when this topic is discussed in the media, there will be sensational coverage, and this can re-start the online abuse cycle. She states “sensationalising the imagery is perpetuating the abuse.”

Rosie speaks of having watched the film which Helen chose not to participate in, and noticing how such different directorial choices led to very different end results. Rosie commented, “it was interesting, because, it is a similar topic, but there is no comparison. For me they fell down every trap that you could possibly fall down of making something very surface level and representing people as two dimensional. And also, they used deepfake!”

Dr Pina commented that MY BLONDE GF differed from other media depictions of non-consensual deepfake pornography, because it is non-sensational and centres the victim within their lived experience. MY BLONDE GF is “centred around Helen and around her experience rather than what happened to her in the past. It's about how she feels now, how she navigated this difficulty, and how that made her feel.”

Dr Pina underlined that this approach is beneficial for encouraging audiences to connect with Helen. Often when confronted with examples of image-based sexual abuse people will try to find an explanation they can understand. “From the literature we know victims are blamed, or people will say, ‘Oh this is just the world.’ ‘Things happen to people because people deserve them.’ It's very easy to ignore and to think ‘it will never happen to me because I would never do that.’” Because the film takes a more abstract approach, the audience cannot use these defences to ‘other’ Helen. “Abstract is good because we can put

ourselves into abstract stories and we can imagine how that experience would feel. And that is why I thought that was so powerful.”

6. For this project, the use of Deepfake technology was inappropriate and detracted from the narrative, but selective special effects did augment the psychological uneasiness.

In our development aims, we wanted to explore whether using Deepfake as a narrative tool had the potential to augment the impact of this story. We needed to research and have discussions with AI specialists to understand the use of deepfake in storytelling their learnings around the effects and implications of using this technology. We needed to have discussions with experts who could speak on the possible effects (including re-traumatisation) of using the same technology again on Helen’s image. And we needed to have an ongoing discussion with Helen to understand what her expectations and preferences would be for us to use deepfake technology to tell her story.

We chose to work with Absolute Post in London, because of their experience using deepfake in a [DOVE campaign](#). In this campaign, mothers and daughters watched deepfaked videos of the mother giving the daughter advice which promoted unrealistic or unsafe beauty standards – the sort of advice the daughters had seen on social media frequently. This prompted a conversation between the mothers and daughters about the types of messages they were receiving from their social media. We felt that this was an interesting and provocative use of deepfake technology.

Dr Pina raised the issue that using deepfake on Helen’s image carried serious risk for re-traumatisation for Helen. She urged us to be very cautious and prioritise consent from Helen.

An initial attempt to deepfake Helen’s image was so disturbing that we moved away from this approach. Next, we developed the idea of using manipulation of images to create a sense of uncanniness. We attempted mimicking the non-blinking stare of a deepfake video and creating a computer ‘glitch’ effect would disrupt Helen’s image. These approaches were intended to make the audience feel the unsettling and creepy nature of deepfake, without re-manipulating Helen’s image. However, these effects proved to add confusion to the narrative, and we moved on from this as well.

Our next idea was to create a feeling of uncanniness to represent and augment the psychological state of stress, paranoia, and disconnection from reality Helen experienced after learning about and seeing the



*Figure 6: Film Still - image manipulated to isolate Helen. The words written by the perpetrator hang above her head.*

manipulated images of herself. Absolute Post manipulated one image to make Helen appear far away and small in a black space. This highlights how alone and fragile she felt. Above her hang the words written by the perpetrator.

The second use of a special effect is during the nightmare sequence. In this sequence, Helen is looking at a mirror and turns towards the camera. We added a lag so the image in the mirror turns after Helen has turned. This reinforces the disconnection Helen felt with herself.



*Figure 7: Film still - Helen has turned her head, but the reflection has not*

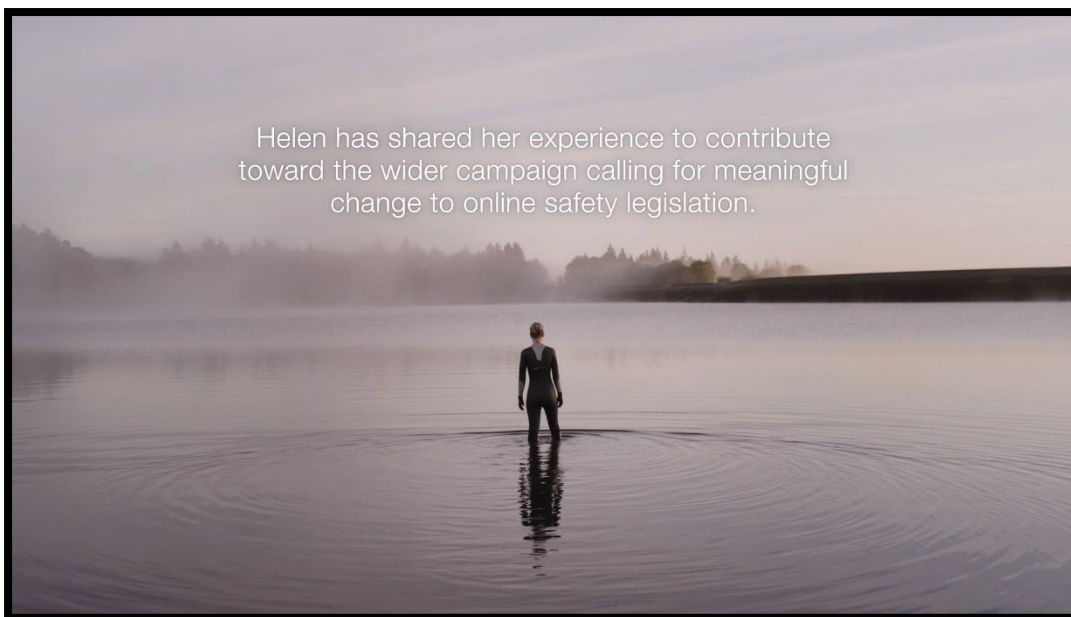
These subtle but powerful special effects ensure we are staying with Helen's experience and the impact of it. They enhance the transmission of Helen's experience to the audience and do not re-create the abusive process again.

This development process around the use of Deepfake and special effects was incredibly important. The potential to unthinkingly do harm was high, which was why it was a valuable opportunity to work with experts and out try ideas. We were also able to build in space for Helen to feedback on the final product, once we had had these discussions. Helen felt that these special effects were effective and reflected her experience. The support of OKRE meant that this could be an explorative process with a lot of curiosity.

7. We determined that the most powerful impact for this film would be to give audiences the realisation "this could happen to anyone, this could happen to me" and to minimise the distance between the audience and Helen's experience.

Our final development aim was to consider and design the impact for the film.

Initially, we had considered that perhaps the film would be able to encourage the government to



*Figure 8: Film still - the final words of the film underscore Helen's reasons for sharing her story and the idea that we need meaningful change*

include non-consensual deepfake in the Online Safety Bill – currently working its way through Parliament. This was why we wanted to work with Professor Clare McGlynn, whose specialisation is the legal framework around digital forms of sexual abuse and harassment. However, we came to feel that by including the discussions of the bill and punishment for perpetrators, we would be de-centring Helen and her experience.

Dr Pina commented that the great strength of this approach was shifting the conversation away from what technology can do and focusing on the effect that it can have on someone's real life. "With this approach the audience isn't looking at it from outside, sort of like a spy watching somebody from a distance. This project eliminates the distance, and it places you right there next to Helen. You're talking to her and you're seeing what she's going through."

Dr Pina also pointed out that by focusing on Helen and her experience we would ensure that the impact and message would stay relevant for far longer. "Unfortunately, technology speeds on and turns out new things constantly. Legislation and research and everyone else are just running after trying to catch up. What we need to do is to teach people the right way to use technology. To understand the impact and the ethics around it. I think that is one of the things that this film is doing by helping you see the other side."

Helen reflected that she hopes the impact will be to encourage people to consider the power of an image and the power they have to choose how to interact with and create images. She said, "We can have our own moral and ethical standards and encourage individual choice. We can change consciousness around that and the ways that we take it for granted."

Rosie reflected that she is still curious about many of the themes in the film. "In a world where we are saturated by images all day long, what has happened to the meaning of an image? How does that kind of culture affect how we are participating? What are we participating in without realising that we're participating? What are we vulnerable to?"

With this agreement to focus on technological literacy and increasing understanding and empathy, we will work to create a campaign around the release of the film to provoke conversation on this topic.



## CONCLUSION

We have come to the end of the MY BLONDE GF project. With OKRE's support we have been able to address all our development aims. We developed an understanding of Helen's lived experience of image based-sexual abuse and the mental health impacts for her. We developed an effective ethical framework for the project. We developed an understanding of how to discuss the manipulated images, and do so in a way that is ethical and empowering. We developed an in-depth understanding of deepfake technology, and explored how to use deepfake technology to tell the story. Ultimately decided there was no way to do so in a way that was ethical and empowering. We developed an understanding of what this technology and Helen's experience means within a larger societal context. We considered the potential impact this film could have for work being done to raise awareness around image-based abuse in the UK.

For other practitioners thinking of working with participants with lived experience of image-based sexual abuse, we would recommend prioritising and discussing ethics, safeguarding, and informed consent with a thoughtful group of well informed and caring experts in the development stage of filming. This emphasis would interrupt the unintentional and harmful cycles of re-enacting the victimisation and disempowerment of victims. We hope that this film and report will contribute to ongoing discussions on how we use and treat technology within our society.

With further resources, we would love to collaborate with Rosie Morris, Helen, and Dr Pina in addition to other filmmakers to write a trauma informed guide with suggested best-practices or resource check lists for media makers working with individuals with lived experiences of image-based sexual abuse.

Collaboration with all our contributors and participants was invaluable for the process, and we would like to thank OKRE for their support of this collaboration. We hope that this film and report will contribute to the evolving discussion of image-based abuse in all media forms.