

# The Dick Pic: Harassment, Curation, and Desire

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Susanna Paasonen<sup>1</sup>, Ben Light<sup>2</sup> , and Kylie Jarrett<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

The combined rise of digital photography and social media has expanded what might be considered photo worthy. Among the pouting selfies and food stuffs of the day exists the ubiquitous dick pic. The mainstream media generally focuses on dick pics of the unsolicited kind, which, negatively positioned, are commonly associated with heterosexual harassment. Considering the ubiquity of dick pics across apps and platforms, research on the topic nevertheless remains scarce. In this article, we examine the dick pic as an online communicative form, first considering how it manifests the ability to harass and then moving beyond this dominant framing to analysis of contexts where such images are collated, expected, and sought after. Through this analysis of dick pics as figures and actors of harassment, curation, and desire, we demonstrate the simultaneous tenacity and flexibility of their meanings in connection with the dynamics of consent and non-consent, intimacy and distance, and complex circuits of desire. We further address the role of platforms, apps, and app stores, via their community standards and terms of use, in shaping the nature, and presence, of dick pics, and discuss the affective and communicative functions that these affordances serve (or fail to serve). Our analysis of three key modes of engagement with dick pics demonstrates the ambiguity and multiple valences of the phenomenon addressed.

## Keywords

social media, dick pics, humor, harassment, gender, user-generated content

With the ubiquity of digital photography, what has been considered photo worthy has been expanded to include the everyday, including that which goes beyond its highlights (Murray, 2008; van House, 2009). Pictures of enjoyed meals, pets sleeping, and selfies featuring the accessories of the day are both documented and shared on social media platforms in ways that have given rise to novel visual ecologies (see Marwick, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015). These practices involve an extended definition of personal and private photography as it is increasingly practiced through apps with the default intention of sharing.

Meanwhile, photo worthiness itself remains subject to interpretation and occasional debate, from the distribution of drunken party photos (Lyons, Goodwin, Griffin, McCreanor, & Barnes, 2016) to naked selfies (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Salter, 2016). This is the case with the phenomenon of dick pics, a common genre of user-generated visual content involving the display of male genitalia. The Urban Dictionary identifies the dick pic as “a wordless suggestion of intercourse.” Yet, despite being defined as straightforward invitations for sexual intimacy, the aims and purposes of dick pics often remain obscure to their recipients: the reactions they generate certainly do not all revolve in positive affective registers.

Like much sexual social media content, the dick pic is both commonplace—even ubiquitous—and controversial.

The sharing of dick pics involves gradations of risk connected to privacy, reputation, and professional status for their producers, recipients, and distributors alike. As listed by the male lifestyle magazine, *Crave*, both female and male health care professionals have lost jobs after taking candid pictures of patients’ genitalia as jokes, men have lost their jobs after accidentally sharing dick pics with colleagues and for documenting practical jokes involving a penis and the preparation of fast food (Henry, 2016). Since the circulation of such private shots fills the criteria for harassment, they have also invited corporate and sometimes police intervention. In many popular media narrative, dick pics are construed as problematic, risky, and even dangerous. Meanwhile, in

<sup>1</sup>University of Turku, Finland

<sup>2</sup>University of Salford, UK

<sup>3</sup>Maynooth University, Ireland

## Corresponding Author:

Ben Light, School of Health and Society, University of Salford, Salford, M6 6PU, UK.

Email: b.light@salford.ac.uk



relation to their ubiquity across apps and platforms, research on dick pics remains scarce. Existing studies (see Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018; Salter, 2016; Tiidenberg, 2014, 2016; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Vitis & Gilmour, 2016; Waling & Pym, 2017) have considered them as part of the panoply of practices associated with online misogyny and harassment, in connection with sexting practices where their purposes can be confusing and their social resonances troubling, as evoking humorous feminist responses, as well as in terms of the possibilities for the construction of positive body image.

As this diversity of approaches already suggests, the dick pic is not phenomenologically one singular thing, but rather catches and orients attention of varying qualities, and establishes diverse relationships between the senders and receivers of these images. Dick pics combine the self-shooting practices of selfie culture with some of the visual codes and capacities of pornography. Distributed in one-to-one, one-to-many, and even many-to-many communication networks, they are by default subject to degrees of semantic flexibility and affective openness. The issue at stake would not, therefore, be merely disagreements over what may or may not be photo worthy, appropriate for sharing, obscene or risky in terms of one's public reputation. It is equally one of regimes of desirability involved in bodily exposure and the social norms connected to gender, sexuality and sociability. Dick pics move in and across different frames of interpretation shaped by the affective registers of, for instance, shame, desire, disgust, interest, amusement, and aggression. These interpretative frames, both tenuous and flexible, are drawn according to the dynamics of consent and non-consent; intimacy and distance; as well as those relating to the circuits of desire and revulsion that galvanize encounters between different bodies. They are also constituted in dialogue with the platform or service where dick pics circulate, its community standards and terms of use, as well as the communicative functions that such pics may serve within that particular context.

In what follows, we chart the semantic ambivalence, tenacity and flexibility of online dicks pics within three frames of interpretation through which the dick pic becomes understood—or remains unintelligible—as a figure of harassment, curation, and desire. Connected to both social functions and regimes of desirability, these frames figure the dick pics in distinct, and mutually incompatible, veins. First, we examine unsolicited dick pics as instruments for phallic power tied in with the gendered dynamics of aggression and shame in heterosexual exchanges. Moving beyond this somewhat hegemonic framing, we then turn to examinations of Tumblr galleries dedicated to the art of the dick pic within scenes of social curation conducted in registers of curiosity, interest, and humor alike. Finally, we address the roles and functions of dick pics in same-sex attracted male hook-up practices within the affective registers of desire and aversion. In doing so, we track the presence of dick pics in online exchanges preceding and spanning social media platforms, with the aim of broadening the gendered and sexualized

dynamics around which contemporary debates on dick pics revolve.

## Harassing Dicks

In the framework of heterosexual encounters, unsolicited dick pics are framed as toxic, invoking shivers of horror, fear, or disgust in their unwilling recipients (Waling & Pym, 2017). Given their focus on encounters of the unsolicited kind, media accounts of women engaging with dick pics in positive or even neutral ways are rare. The same applies to scholarship where images emerging from mutual exchange or visual play as desired objects of heterosexual titillation are rarely addressed (Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018 is a notable exception). Disconnected from female desire, dick pics are associated with harassment, appearing alongside negative social media comments, revenge porn, and gender-based hate speech as a dimension of the Internet's toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2017; Vitis & Gilmour, 2016). Understood in this vein, a self-made image of the penis functions as a figure of phallic male power connected to a fundamental lack of sexual safety experienced by women online. Such an image serves as an online variation of cat calling: in both instances, the men involved may frame their actions as a compliment taking the form of sexual interest, yet these nevertheless fail to be recognized as such.

Social media is replete with celebrated accounts of women reacting to dick pic harassment. In one such widely reported incident of 2016, Samantha Mawdsley received through Facebook Messenger an unwanted dick pic from a stranger and reacted by bombarding the man with equally unsolicited dick pics in return. After the exchange was through, she publicly shared the message thread with the man's name and image intact:

My initial thought was to ignore it, as we females are taught from such a young age. But . . . Nah! I decided to mess with him and call him out on all his ridiculous behaviours and double standards. To my delight, he was suckered into the debate! My favourite bit is "I just want to puke! Please stop!" . . . genuine apologies for all the pics of penis—I censored them because NOBODY likes an unsolicited d\*ck pic!

Mawdsley's Facebook account was briefly deactivated due to the avalanche of pictures she posted—even if she did use emojis to cover up the dick pics to comply with the platforms' rules of use. The ban was lifted as the exchange grew viral and her public album covering the exchange was shared some 7000 times. Details of the incident circulated on click-bait sites and more established news platforms with mainly laudatory headlines celebrating her reaction, such as "Woman receives unsolicited d\*ck pic from a total stranger—gives him a taste of his own medicine" (Gladwell, 2016). Thus heralded as a champion for gender equality, Mawdsley's actions were firmly framed as fighting back against sexual harassment by making it visible.

For her part, the artist Whitney Bell turned her own collection of circa 200 unsolicited dick pics into an exhibit titled “I didn’t ask for this: A Lifetime of Dick Pics.” In a *Vice* article, Bell emphasized that the project “isn’t dick-hating or man-hating. I love a good dick. I just don’t love harassment.” The article further summed up the essence of the matter: “now that everyone has a camera phone, dick pics are ubiquitous, despite the fact that most women really, really don’t want them” (Stevenson, 2016). Even more recently, the tweet by adult performer Ginger Banks describing her routine of reacting to unsolicited dick pics by reporting them as child pornography to CyberTipline gained momentum across online news resources and clickbaits. Her novel standard reply, “Did you just send me a picture of a child’s penis?,” “It looks like a child’s (sic) penis. Im (sic) reporting this,” Banks makes use of the reporting and flagging systems in place that, while long focused on child pornography, do not extend to gender-based harassment among adults.

In addition to individual tactics for countering unsolicited sexual online exchanges, collective projects have emerged, from “Douchebags of Grindr” (est. 2011) documenting undesirable and offensive behavior on Grindr (see also Miller, 2015, p. 638) to “Bye Felipe” (est. 2014), “calling out dudes who turn hostile when rejected or ignored.” As we discuss further below, in the context of dating and hook up apps for same sex attracted men sending of unsolicited dick pics does not necessarily qualify as douchiness, whereas this tends to be the case in heterosexual contexts. In the incidents described above, the experience of receiving unsolicited dick pics was defined as invasive, disturbing, and humiliating—as a form of harassment that cuts down women’s sense of sexual agency rather than contributing to it in any meaningful or pleasurable way. When perceived as involving more than an edge of male violence, the act of publicly shaming and ridiculing the man in question—often though mockery of penis size—becomes seen as not only acceptable but something to be celebrated.

## Shaming Dicks

In 2014, Anna Gensler started to make unflattering nude portraits of men who have made sexual advances, objectified, or harassed her on the dating apps Tinder and OkCupid, and accompanied them with the man’s first name and age, as well as excerpts from their exchanges on her Instagram and Tumblr project, “Granniepants.” Typically, these portraits represented the harasser with minimized genitalia in connection with their come-ons or aggressive attacks following their disinterested reception. As a comment on the toxicity of straight male sexual entitlement (F. Shaw, 2016), the project went viral. One of the men began to bombard Gensler with graphic death threats and, realizing that her information had suddenly grown public, she stopped updating the project. In their discussion of Granniepants, Laura Vitis and Fairleigh Gilmour (2016) identify it as a form of critical witnessing

that makes visible the mundane harassment that women are subjected to and which fights back through strategies of satire, reverse objectification and public shaming, the impact of which is amplified through broad social media circulation.

At the same time, the micro-penises in Gensler’s nudes can, similarly to Banks’ suggestions of children’s genitalia, be considered a gendered form of body shaming. Mawdsley also deployed this tactic when bombarding the man who had sent her the unsolicited dick pic with other dick pics in return, using comments such as: “Are you sending your little penis pics to people you think are girls?”; “Well . . . it’s not big, let’s be honest”; “It’s smaller than the pics I sent you”; “Do you want me to send you small dick pics so you feel better?” By fighting a dick pic with pictures of larger penises, Mawdsley broke the desired mode of interaction as one revolving in the registers of private, heterosexually titillating show and tell, or phallic superiority. This disruption depended on the framing of the unsolicited dick pic as an object of revulsion and symbolic violence, as well as on smaller penis size as a source of shame and embarrassment. The mockery of modest (“peanut”) penis size has in fact been identified as a particular risk of humiliation faced by young men sending nude selfies (Salter, 2016, pp. 2735-2736), and hence as something of a default move in responding to dick pics.

Addressing the social power dynamics of shaming, sociologist Beverley Skeggs (2004) draws a distinction between resentment as an expression of powerlessness following a hurtful experience and resentment as an expression of the powerful. For Skeggs (2004, p. 182), resentment involves

a triple achievement, for it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) which overwhelms the hurt; a culprit responsible for the hurt; and a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt).

The reactions by Mawdsley, Banks, and Gensler to unsolicited dick pics followed the affective contours of resentment evidenced in the righteous anger evoked by sexual harassment, in their identification of culprits, as well as in their tactic of using social media to gain vengeance through shaming. As an expression of the powerful, though, the affect of resentment is, for Skeggs, deeply tied in with moralism practiced by “those who feel they are losing the power that they once had (or would have had as a result of their positioning)” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 182). The dynamics of body shaming are connected to this kind of affect. Moralizing involves dwelling in other people’s shame (Warner, 2000, p. 4) and shaming hence becomes a means of putting subjects back in their place. Resentment and resentment, as outlined by Skeggs, are both at play in the reactions to dick pics, which suggests a complex distribution of agency.

Public debates on the unsolicited sharing of sexual imagery, from revenge porn to dick pics, revolve almost exclusively on the victimization of women. At the same time, two recent studies found no gender disparity in being subject to

image-based abuse online (Kaszubska, 2017; Lenhart, Michelle, & Price-Feeney, 2016) while identifying it to be disproportionately used against queer people under the age of 30, against people with disabilities, as well as against racial and ethnic minorities. These findings suggest that image-based online abuse both draws from and re-animates the dynamics of sexual shaming, marginalization, violence, and hate in ways that fail to be accounted for within a framework of gendered victimization. As the relationship to resentment suggests, straight women engaged in online shaming may also be exercising social power, and hence move between the dynamics of resentment and resentment in ways that are difficult to pin down.

The shaming of sexual harassers, fueled by the affective intensities of resentment and anger, can be devastating in its reverberations, especially when such incidents gain positive viral circulation. In her brief account of online shaming, Emily van der Nagel (2016) notes how it can punish “people permanently and disproportionately to their actions.” Attempts to call off disturbing behavior may become a form of online image-based harassment as stories circulate, accumulate, and become stored for the foreseeable future in social media data banks through which the people involved are perpetually discoverable. And, as Frances Shaw (2016, p. 2) further notes, gleeful coverage of women turning tables on harassers may take “joy in the practice of shaming itself,” resort to patronizing and sensationalist tones, and indeed “reinforce or perpetuate some of the gendered harms of harassment by encouraging victim blaming and sexual shame.” To understand the dick pic as a focal point in the gendered struggle for power also requires nuanced consideration of these contraflows of power and agency without fixing analysis into a binary model of gender, or to the framework of heterosexual desire.

## Curated Dicks

As any scholar of the sociocultural would note, the reception that a dick pic receives all depends on the context—and, in the framework of networked media, somewhat on the platform. While an unsolicited dick pic may not evoke an enthusiastic response in some contexts, it may in others. Furthermore, not all dick pic distribution is unsolicited and not everyone views such images just because they happen to receive one. Some social media platforms encourage or facilitate the sharing of intimate photographs; others ban them through policy and technical affordances that police and censor content. For example until a drastic change in content policy in December 2018 banning most sexual content, Tumblr was recognized for its queer-friendly and body positive infrastructure and was of the former variety. Many a Tumblr blog—from “Best Cock Pics!” to “Let Me Take a Dick Pic” and “Cock Pictures From the World of Penis Pictures”—were dedicated to the art of the dick pic, along with a plethora of Tumblrs focusing on nude selfies and the curation of amateur porn.

Tumblr’s previous terms of service allowed sexually explicit content as long as it had been flagged as not safe for work (NSFW), so that users who prefer not to encounter the material could avoid doing so. Tumblrs mainly consist of images, animated GIFs, and video links. According to the community standards valid at the time of writing the article,

You can embed anything in a Tumblr post as long as it’s lawful and follows our other guidelines, but please don’t use Tumblr’s Upload Video feature to upload sexually explicit video. We’re not in the business of hosting adult-oriented videos (and it’s fucking expensive). (Tumblr, 2018)

In contrast with the stricter community regulations of other image-based social media services such as Flickr, Instagram, or Pinterest that it soon caught up with, Tumblr became the hub for NSFW self-shooting practices, alternative and sub-cultural content, and diverse user-curated pornographic collections. Millennial women have been reported as a particularly active user group for Tumblr porn (e.g. Moore, 2015; Reid, 2015) while the service’s “queer ecosystem” has been identified with the broader creation of minoritarian, queer, and feminist sexual publics (Cho, 2015; Fink & Miller, 2014).

As Katrin Tiidenberg (2014) points out in her research on NSFW self-shooting, the accepting sexual publics afforded by platforms such as Tumblr have remained separate from the shaming, negativity, and snarkiness that characterize much of social media exchange. On Tumblr, sexual self-shooting allowed rendering one’s body an object of sexual desire independent of one’s precise orientations (see Tiidenberg, 2016; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015). Alongside the dynamics of shaming that cut through much of the debates on the public visibility of nude selfies, sexual self-shooting entails emancipatory potential in supporting body positivity in ways that do not simply reiterate dominant gender norms. This involves both an accommodating platform and regimes of consent conditioning the kinds of social exchanges and uses that the posted images may enter. In this context, dick pics are not excluded from the realm of pleasurable posing, sexual titillation, and desirable gazing (Tiidenberg, 2014; Waling & Pym, 2017).

Madeleine Holden’s Tumblr, “Critiquing your dick pics with love,” has been widely covered in social media as a body-positive response to sexting (Hamilton, 2015; Meghan, n.d.). Rather than framing dick pics through aversion and shame, Holden motivated her enterprise through her appreciation of a good dick pic and her desire to help men improve the aesthetic and technical quality of their intimate self-shooting practices for the benefit of all parties involved. Her blog consisted of submissions by men who wish to have their dick pic critiqued, or by those who have happened to receive one, on a scale from F to A+. In their analysis of this Tumblr as a site of subversive feminist humor, Jessica Ringrose and Emilie Lawrence (2018, p. 699) saw it as working to reduce

a reading of the penis as object of power, threat, danger, sexual intention, etc. to one of relative beauty, vulnerability, delicacy, and style with the penis' sexual imperative being systematically redistributed in commentary as well as in some of the images themselves.

In doing so, it opened "space for a more playful relationship to dick pics as non-threatening, funny, and aesthetically complicated" (Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018, p. 701).

Given that her focus was on photographic style, feel, and execution, Holden refused to critique the dicks themselves and explicitly resists any normative criteria of a "perfect dick" as connected to a specifically gendered body. For instance, a shot by a pre-op transman was critiqued for zooming in too close and for being slightly blurry, just as a shot by a cis-gendered man received critique for their distracting choice of background, and a woman would get a B for her picture with a strap-on dildo as it lacks "oomph." The feedback was constructive and appreciative, focusing on the strengths while raising suggestions for improvement.

Tumblrs consisting of original submissions and reblogged content assemble images shot in different times, spaces, and locations, with different intentions and motivations, into thematic wholes that again feed other blogs in the movement of endless circulation characteristic to the platform. Joseph Brennan (2018, p. 1) has identified this as "microporn" reassembling materials out of context. Writing on the curatorial principles of Tumblr, Alexander Cho (2015, p. 46) points out how its locus of authorship "is less focused on the creation or capture of an original image and located instead around the personalized stream as a whole, a dynamic of constant movement and active selection." This curation and circulation gives rise to blogs both specific and heterogeneous, both structured around a specific theme—be it pictorial or other—and catering to user curiosity with surprising and whimsical combinations of seemingly disparate elements.

Shared in this visual economy, the now-banned dick pics were framed as desired, appreciated, and as open to entering a range of social exchanges. Like naked selfies more generally, dick pics came in a range of Tumblr subcategories, from general forums such as "Dick Pics," "Cock pics," "Send-Ur-Cock-Pics," and "Amateur Cock" to blogs dedicated to celebrities, small or large penis size, as well as to dick pics defined by their spaces and contexts of production. Consisting of images submitted by visitors and harvested by the bloggers themselves, the Tumblrs often catered to male viewers in their penile aestheticization. Nevertheless, these displays were not necessarily coded as either straight or gay, or fixed as catering to people of any specific gender identification. In instances such as "Things My Dick Does" (est. 2012), probably the best-known example of penile social media micro-celebrity, black and white dick pics featured along with additional cartoon elements of facial elements and hands. The blog described "the little dude's" mundane, seemingly independent adventures from getting all messy with ejaculate

to hugging bananas, enjoying beer in the great outdoors, and being attacked by Pokemons. Things My Dick Does also survived an edited migration from Tumblr to Pinterest via Priscila Oliveira's (2018) self-curated board, its cutesy cartoon-like additions successfully avoiding censorship in Pinterest's much less open community standards. In its combination of sexual explicitness, humor, offbeat cuteness, self-love, and social media diversion, the Tumblr occupied a very particular pocket in the visual ecology of dick pics.

Most dick pic Tumblrs involved much less of a narrative framing. "Big Dick Club!" (est. 2010), for example, unfolded as series of selfies, some with the faces and surroundings intact, and some zooming in close to the penis, yet with minimal framing beyond mentions of the source. The men in the images displayed their genitalia with facial expressions ranging from a knowing smirk to a deadpan stare, flexing their muscles, and spreading their legs in bathrooms, bedrooms, living rooms, and hotel rooms. "Cock Out at Work" and "Wangs at Work" featured submitted and re-blogged dick pics shot in a range of workplaces and professional contexts. Some images were anonymous and others much less so; some men posed at the warehouse and others at a real estate agent office; some smiled and others disguised their face; some men were young and some considerably older; some wore the uniform of a firefighter, others those of a Marine private, police officer, or a flight attendant, while yet others sported a neat suit and tie. Dicks were taken out in shared offices, on the roofs of workplaces, by communal coffee makers and in car repair shops, documented as pictures and animated GIFs. Dicks were erect, semi-erect and flaccid, fully out or candidly peeking from under the waistband as to go unnoticed by coworkers who may or may not be part of the images' economies of desire. Most images had no captions but some provided minimal framing of action, as in "Work Got Boring, So Here you Go": "BW—celebrating the last few minutes before vacation" or "Cock out at work and on the fit secretary's desk." Many captions simply evoked boredom as key motivation for whipping out the cock while also introducing social dynamics with co-workers, work itself, and working environments as fuel for their selfie desires.

Writing on Tumblr's nonlinear "queer reverb" of "repeat and repeat," Cho (2015, pp. 46, 47) identified it as a "palpable, subterranean rhythm": "dark optimism of a hovering possibility for community, the release of self-expression . . . and the potential for kinship and intimacy outside of heteronormative family and relationship structures." The exchange and circulation of dick pics motivated by boredom and the pleasure of showing off may at first glance seem quite detached from such emergent sexual publics resistant to gender and sexual normativity. They can nevertheless be seen as gradations of the non-identity based sexual reverb that Cho mapped out, and as equally involving, and being driven by, an affective charge of potentiality. Dick pic after dick pic gave rise to affinity and sameness across scales of variation without anchoring their inter-connections in any notion of

sexual identity, orientation, purpose, aim, or desire. It is the male body, and the penis in particular, that remained the key focus of attention and curatorial effort. These Tumblr displays of appreciation remained detached from the figure of harassment that dominates journalistic coverage of unsolicited dick pics in heterosexual exchanges. Instead, they offered the penis as object for any willing gaze that can be endlessly re-blogged, and hence recontextualized, independent of the interests and desires of those uploading the file (cf. Renninger, 2015, p. 1525). In contrast to the assumptions about the phallic power of the unsolicited dick pic addressed above, the intended audience remained open while the publics that the blogs comprised were both ambivalent and heterogeneous.

### Desired Dicks

In sexual cultures among same-sex attracted men, attitudes toward and practices regarding the presence, sharing, and circulation of the digitized dick are also complicated. Dick pics are pervasive within dating and hook up apps used by same-sex attracted men and are a generally accepted actor within this sexual infrastructure. For this group, the consumption of the dick pic has been a central feature and enabler of digitally mediated sexual cultures since the emergence of the Web and other computer networks. This contrasts with (hetero)sexual cultures where their presence is presented as much more problematic or at least ambivalent for their assumed grossness or banality.

Early studies of online community such as that of David F. Shaw (1997, p. 139) show the presence of the dick in the use of pseudonyms, where one user calls themselves “Meateatr,” and in discourse as “Scorsese” informs the researcher “You’ve heard of ‘IRC inches?’ . . . somebody says eight and you know it’s probably five.” John Campbell (2004, p. 70) similarly points to the role of the dick where a user jokingly asks another if they are “still cruising for cock” and yet another, when asked how he identifies his gender on Internet Relay Chat (IRC), simply responds with “my dick.” The early practices of those seeking to hook up on the now defunct French Minitel system further allude to the dick. As Anna Livia (2002) notes, numbers (between 10 and 25—referring to centimeters) and/or abbreviations like TTBM (Très Très Bien Monté, translating into very very well hung) are used in complex codes of expressive pseudonyms to denote penis size among other information such as location. Moreover, an Australian study, conducted in the mid 2000s found that 80.5% of survey participants had viewed explicit pictures—dick pics included—on chat profiles in preparation for arranging a meet up (Murphy, Rawstone, Holt, & Ryan, 2004). Similar language is evidenced in Sharif Mowlabocus’ (2010a) study of the cybercottage, Uni\_Cock. The name of the cybercottage points to the centrality of the dick in same-sex attracted men’s digital culture, while individual posts include references to a “6” cut cock,”

“8½ inches of cock!” and “nice cock” (Mowlabocus, 2010a, pp. 139-140).

In the late 1990s, sites such as *Gaydar* and *Squirt* introduced profile-based database logic to hooking up (Light, 2007, 2016; Light, Fletcher, & Adam, 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010a; O’Riordan, 2005). This early web based hook-up culture introduced further forms of the shareable dick through the deployment of digitized photography, video chat, and writing of dicks into interfaces. *Gaydar*’s profile template, for instance, invites users to provide a description of themselves, including an indication of penis size and circumcision status, preferred sexual role, and attitude toward safe sex (Cassidy, 2016; Light, 2007; Mowlabocus, 2010a). Guides to using *Gaydar* further explicate and foreground the importance of the dick in hook-up culture: “Mr Right Now wants to see your cock—not a pic of you cuddling Aunty Ethel on Christmas Day. Mr Right might be put off by a cock-only portfolio” (JockBoy26, 2010, p. 17).

In the early days of *Gaydar*, and before the widespread uptake of digital cameras and smart phones, members offered to take and digitize pics for those who did not have access to the necessary technology, such as flatbed scanners. *Gaydar* also provided chat rooms where links to Microsoft Network (MSN) chat accounts were shared freely in order for members to engage in camming. This activity often focused on the dick rather than faces. Such networked visual sharing of the dick continues today. The ability to archive and access sexual partners, as afforded by networked communication, has significant social, personal, and communal impacts and potentials for affording and generating novel forms of sexual publics—or “publics of privates” (Race, 2015, p. 505).

Even given more readily available access to camming and the high-quality video made available via technological developments such as apps, smart phones, fiber optics, WiFi, and 4G, the static dick pic continues to have value within hook up cultures among same-sex attracted men. For its part, the *Squirt* app exemplifies the continuing presence and circulation of dick pics, alongside more novel visual innovations such as “sexicons” (see Light, 2016). Sexicons, a play on emoticons, are shareable GIFs portraying particular sexual proclivities that include the dick as a mode of communication in a variety of ways, as shown in Figure 1. Such GIFs reference the early days of online sexual play among gay men where similar assemblages featured to add life to predominantly textual environments (see Campbell, 2004).

On *Squirt*, face pics are often stored privately and made available only to those who are serious about hooking up: profiles often feature a dick pic instead. The reasons for this vary in that some users of the app are not open about their sexual preferences in everyday life, some are married to or in partnerships with other men and women, and the activities associated with the app are not necessarily socially or legally acceptable (Light, 2016).

That dicks are so pervasive in dating and hook-up apps used by same-sex attracted men, however, does not imply



**Figure 1.** Sexicons on Squirt.

that their presence is any less easy to swallow for some. The visual presence of the dick has long been contested. The practice of displaying a dick rather than a face has occurred on Squirt since its inception in 1998, as it has on sites such as Gaydar. Yet, some members refuse to respond to messages from people who do not have a picture of their face but only one of their dick (see Light, 2007; Mowlabocus, 2010b). Those who offer a dick pic or a torso shot instead are often not openly gay (or out) and do not post a facial picture for fear of being identified. Consequently, these members are marginalized within what they may perceive as a safe environment and which is favored over traditional meeting places such as bars (Light, 2007). The situation persists with new apps such as Grindr where members using face pics are reportedly seen as more genuine and honest, and where users are wary of, or do not talk to, those without face pictures (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015).

While the previous sections demonstrate the desirability of the curation of dick pics, a common complaint made in hook up apps for same sex attracted men is the presence of dick pic collectors. These individuals are cast as duplicitous members who pretend to want to meet in order to gain access to dick pics, whether in platform or via requesting additional pics to be sent by other means such as SMS, WhatsApp, or Snapchat. Once pics have been received, the conversation is abruptly ended and the user who has provided them may be blocked. This activity can be read as a form of harassment as pics are appropriated in undesired ways. Rather than the dick pic being sent in an unsolicited fashion, it is instead taken, undermining the expectations and desires of the dick pic sharer.

Platforms through which desired dicks circulate also contest their legitimacy. The mobile version of Squirt, for example, operates as a HTML5 site. Unlike apps such as Gaydar and Grindr, Squirt does not offer members the option of downloading it from the Apple App Store or Google Play. This configuration creates a set of very particular associations. Squirt is proudly uncensored, barring only certain forms of illegal imagery such as the inclusion of minors and animal sex, and dick pics can therefore be viewed on the opening page of the app which comprises a geo-locative grid

of user profiles. The app can operate in this way because it does not have to conform to the regulations or community standards posed by Apple's App Store or the Google Play infrastructure (Light, 2016). In contrast, Gaydar and Grindr are subject to app store rules with both Apple and Google stores banning sexually explicit materials or those that stimulate gratification. The strict implementation of this policy would not allow for the existence of Gaydar or Grindr in the Google Play store—both apps nevertheless exist within it, suggesting that an element of interpretive flexibility is clearly being deployed by app stores. This disconnect between the users of these apps and these platforms also highlights the dominance of the idea of dick pics as inherently toxic and tied to issues of harassment. Even in contexts where it is an object of desire, the dick pic cannot avoid this framing.

## Conclusion

The visual ecology and economy of social media revolve around the imperative of capturing and optimizing user attention (e.g. Marwick, 2015, p. 138). If visual content fails to stand out and appeal to people browsing through sites and apps through the resonances it has to offer, it flows by, fails to circulate, and is soon enough forgotten. Despite the notable institutional and other contextual differences involved, this broad logic applies equally to journalistic photos appealing to the readership of online newspapers, viral web content brands like Lolcats, Tinder profiles, and sexually explicit user-generated content such as dick pics. At the same time, the attention that dick pics garner across different social media platforms ranges not only in its intensities—from the pics being ignored to evoking a torrent of responses—but also in its affective qualities. Particularly where women are concerned, unsolicited dick pics are predominantly understood as ruptures in networked communication that make expected forms of sociability come to a halt and be recalibrated, often in highly antagonistic ways. Yet, unsolicited dick pics are equally part of the everyday uses of hook up apps used by same sex attracted men. Receipt of unsolicited dick pics in this context is more commonly experienced as disinterest and boredom than harassment. In contrast, requested,

searchable, and desired dick pics may smoothly facilitate intimate exchanges and accelerate the reverbs of sexual desire in all kinds of contexts. Rather than being the simple exercise of misogynist energy that is so often attributed to it, the dick pic is a complex, multivalent object that is not so readily defined.

The three frames of harassment, curation, and desire addressed in this article do not exhaust the ways in which dick pics are sensed and made sense of, nor are they mutually exclusive. Someone may like collecting dick pics, but not want to receive them in an unsolicited fashion. Another person may be happy to share their dick pic but not want it to be used in someone's public collection shared on Tumblr, or whatever platform will now take over its functions in supporting sexual cultures. These frames nevertheless help to map some of the contradictions, tensions, and complexities that accompany the sharing of such content. Responses would vary according to the images being solicited and knowingly sought out or not, as well as on the style and aims of the communication that accompanies them. Not all people who desire a penis sexually enjoy the sight of a dick pic and such lines of aversion are not clearly drawn along the axis of gender or sexual orientation. As argued above, the issues also involve those of actual and imagined rules of platforms, app stores, and contexts, as well as those concerning the styles and motivations of the images themselves. In sum, the palatability, or the lack thereof, of dick pics is the product of complicated sociotechnical achievements.

It is inaccurate to identify the dick pic as that which, in 1980s postmodern semiotic discourse, was known as an empty or floating signifier that, lacking a clear referent, is forever open to new acts of signification without becoming stuck with any of them. While the connotations of the dick pic vary drastically, its denotative, or literal meaning remains firmly recognizable and anchored in its gendered genital referents. For example, CamSoda (2017) has introduced Dickometrics Penis Verification which, via CamSoda's Penis Recognition Technology (PRT), allows users to log in by using a picture of their, preferably erect, penis. In this instance, the dick pic's indexical quality allows verification of one's identity, although this says little about the conceptual significance of that image in other contexts. Dick pics are ambiguous and malleable in their uses and meanings while simultaneously remaining literal, obvious, and fixed in that which they represent. This paradoxical ambiguous literalness is key to the frictions involved in the accumulation and interpretation of dick pics in social media.

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### ORCID iD

Ben Light  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0038-8979>

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### Author Biographies

Susanna Paasonen is Professor of Media Studies at University of Turku, Finland. With an interest in studies of sexuality, popular culture, and the Internet, she is the author of *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (MITP 2011), *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play* (Goldsmiths Press 2018), and *#NSFW: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media* (with Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light, MITP forthcoming). She serves, for example, on the editorial boards of the journals *New Media & Society*, *Social Media + Society*, *Sexualities*, *Porn Studies*, and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Ben Light is Professor of Digital Society and Associate Dean Research and Innovation, in the School of Health and Society at University of Salford, UK. He is author of *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014) and with Garry Crawford and Victoria Gosling, co-author of *Online Gaming in context* (Routledge 2011). His work is concerned with (non)consumption of the digital, gender and sexuality online, and digital methods.

Kylie Jarrett is Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University, Ireland. She is author of *Feminism, Labor and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (Routledge 2016) and with Ken Hillis and Michael Petit is co-author of *Google and the Culture of Search* (Routledge 2013). She has extensively researched the political economy of the Web, including eBay, YouTube, and Facebook.