

GENDERED PERSPECTIVES ON DICK PICS ACROSS GSNAs

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INTRODUCTION

In this poster, we theorize the many roles of sending dick pics across geosocial networking apps (GSNAs) (i.e., GSNAs targeting different sexualities or sexuality sub-cultures) with specific focus on gendered responses to solicited and unsolicited photos of male genitalia. Adopting a queer theoretical lens, we trouble the current notions in the literature of dick pics as inherently and necessarily emblematic of sexual risk, predation, or power relationships. Drawing on stories from 55 participants in a larger research project from the Collaboratory on Digital Equity Research (CODER) we would like to suggest ways in which dick pics: a) highlight of GSNA use (e.g., as evidenced by the libraries of dick pics that some gay men keep on their phone); b) enable the mitigation of sexual risk in certain contexts (e.g., ensuring a potential sexual partner's penis is compatible with one's sexual preferences or limitations); and c) represent the more obvious role in flirtation, seeking sex, and sexual fantasy across the gender spectrum. We especially draw on the theoretically rich consideration of how GSNA contexts question the symbolic (and heteronormative) power of the dick pic.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Since the debut of Grindr in 2009 (Grindr, 2018) and Tinder in 2012 (Tinder, 2018), geosocial networking apps (GSNAs) have quickly become one of the most common ways to meet new people for online dating, casual sex, and other purposes, including a variety of leisure-centered activities. Though expanding across certain fields, there is a paucity of research examining the use of GSNAs in the leisure literature. Specifically, there is little or no published work that addresses the role of GSNAs in (or as?) sexual leisure, or the importance of photographic representation of self in mobile networked leisure spaces. We seek to address this gap by examining and theorizing the various roles that sharing photographs of penises—"dick pics"—play in the use of GSNAs as tools in, and places of, sexual leisure.

The majority of work on GSNAs focuses on men who have sex with men (MSM; see Albury & Byron, 2016). Largely situated in the public health literature, early work adopted (with few exceptions) a medicalized discourse of GSNAs as sites of increased sexual risk requiring sexual health interventions, especially for "high-risk populations" like MSM and youth (see: Bien, Best, Muessig, Wei, Han, & Tucker, 2015; Currin & Hubach, 2017; Ems & Gonzales, 2015; Goedel & Duncan, 2015; Grosskopf, LeVasseur, & Glaser, 2014; Holloway, Rice, Gibbs, Winetrob, Dunlap, & Rhoades, 2014; Sun, Stowers, Miller, Bachmann, & Rhodes, 2015). Similarly, much of the research on sending others sexually suggestive, semi- or fully-nude photographs (subsumed under research on sexting) has focused on the associated safety and sexual health risks for youth and, to a lesser degree, MSM (Currin & Hubach, 2017; Currin, Hubach, Sanders & Hammer, 2017; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Although some work is beginning to address the exchange of sexualized images on GSNAs in contexts outside of sexting, it tends to do so as part of a larger project on the use of GSNAs more broadly (e.g., Duncan et al., 2018), or it invokes the medicalized discourse of sexual health risk/need for intervention (e.g., Currin & Hubach, 2017). Notable exceptions exist (e.g., Albury & Byron, 2016), but they are far and few between.

PRELIMINARY THEORIZING

Noting much of this void, the researchers from the Collaboratory on Digital Equity Research (CODER) with a mission of "exploring digital practices, both virtual and visceral, to determine and solve digital dilemmas". Reviewed data related to GSNA use and how it was changing and shaping the gender and sexual relations of their users. In working with the data across these studies and examining experiences of multiple members of the research team as they engaged with participants, we identified many instances of commentary related to dick pics, not the least of which being how differently they were perceived by GSNA users across various identity categories and platforms. Fascinated, we are pushing to extend the analysis in the following directions:

- Problematizing dick pics as always being indicative of sexual harassment
- Considering greater nuance in how dick pics have in different domains for health and well-being
- Exposing the heteronormativity present in much of the existing literature related to dick pics, and the general regard for them in binary terms of men sending them to women unsolicited
- Considering dick pics as affirmation of sexual freedom regardless of gender (of sender or recipient)

By considering multiple GSNA contexts and a variety of gendered responses, we demonstrate the rich opportunities for theorizing dick pics as leisure practices versus sexual harassment and everything in between depending on factors inclusive of the gender of those receiving the pics.