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## Dick pics and the shifty meanings of porn

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### ABSTRACT

Dick pics are ubiquitous objects in social media shared for the purposes of harassment, flirtation, suggestion, amusement, and titillation alike. Starting with the question of how dick pics are, or are not classifiable as porn, this article opens up lines of inquiry on the possibilities and limitations of porn as a genre marker, content classifier, and reference point in and for understanding sexual content distributed through networked means. In the contemporary moment when sexual content continues to multiply online even as most social media platforms vigilantly moderate and remove it, scholarly vocabularies risk either lagging behind or posing normative categorisation on the things published and shared, from dick pics to webcam shows and OnlyFans content. This article calls for contextual care in how the notion of porn becomes applied to networked sexual media, the shapes of continue to morph, as well as in how dick pics are made sense of as communication devices and cultural symbols.

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### KEYWORDS

Dick pics; user-generated content; pornography; digital intimacy

This article originates from the seemingly easy and possibly trivial question of how dick pics – as ubiquitous as they are – might be classifiable as porn. The article opens up lines of inquiry on the possibilities and limitations of porn as a genre marker, content classifier, and reference point in and for understanding sexual content distributed through networked means (be it user-generated and not). The basic issue I am concerned with has to do with the academic vocabularies applied to sexual media as they shift and morph, with boundaries that have never been easy to pin down.

Most commonly involving a self-shot close-up photograph of erect male genitalia, dick pics have grown into a mundane yet controversial cultural object with the popularity of smart phones and online image-sharing practices. While discussions of dick pics are overwhelmingly focused on their unsolicited sending and their intermeshing with gendered and sexualized harassment, rape culture, and the online manosphere (see, for example, Mandau 2020; Amundsen 2021), academic inquiry has also broadened the set of questions involved in their circulation. Attention has been paid to the experiences and motivations of men sending unsolicited dick shots; the vulnerabilities involved in self-shooting and sexting; the ambiguities and contextual nuances of receiving, viewing, and making

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sense of dick pics; the implications of their uncontrollable and unwanted circulation; as well as the homosocial and humorous aspects of dick pic exchange (Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Salter 2016; Vitis and Gilmour 2017; Hayes and Dragiewicz 2018; Paasonen, Light, and Jarrett 2019a; Waling and Pym 2019; Amundsen 2021; Bury and Easton 2022; Light, Jarrett, and Paasonen 2022; Waling et al. 2022; Waling 2023).

Dick pics operate simultaneously as pornographic amateur output, vernacular visual media, tools of harassment, invitations for sex, vehicles for humour, and objects of visual and erotic contemplation. They are shared for public viewing on platforms such as Reddit and X (formerly Twitter), the content policies of which allow for sexually explicit imagery (Bury and Easton 2022), sent both with and without consent via social media backchannels, messaging, and hook-up apps, used as profile pics on platforms allowing for this, and displayed on dedicated sites such as My Dick Pictures and Penis Pictures. While dick pics are available for sexual consumption, it remains questionable to what extent their creators and viewers associate them with the genre of pornography (Waling 2023), as for naked self-shooting practices more broadly where, for many, porn is not a relevant point of reference (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015). But if an image of an erect penis that might be consumed for the purposes of masturbation is not quite porn, then what does the notion of porn refer to?

### Things that get banned

In *The Secret Museum*, Walter Kendrick made the influential argument that pornography should not be defined according to pictorial properties or representational qualities, but through practices of regulation. For Kendrick (1996), porn is whatever becomes categorized, disapproved of, policed, and censored as such, both historically and at the time of his writing. If porn is defined through its governance rather than by content, intention, or consumer experience, there is, strictly speaking, 'no there there' to be pinned down as the genre's qualifying marker. Kendrick's perspective has provided an important alternative to definitions of pornography focused on author intention (porn as images or texts intended to sexually arouse), content (porn as sexually explicit materials), or user experience (porn as content that sexually arouses), given that these are all differently shifty and subjective criteria. People are, after all, sexually aroused by all kinds of things.

I nevertheless suggest that Kendrick's take on the category of porn, while highly useful in charting the relations and boundaries of porn and so-called mainstream media culture from one decade and legal context to another, falls short in charting the contemporary context where porn is an object of mass consumption and where the forms of sexual media are so diverse that it is difficult to draw the boundaries of porn as a genre, especially when the term is attached to cultural objects from sneakers to cars, food, and puppies to connote gratuitous yet non-sexual pleasure taken in one thing or another. All the while, porn remains firmly in place as a capacious marker of obscenity, an object of moral concerns and panics, as well as a field of cultural production and consumption steeped in some social stigma (Barker 2018).

Defining porn through its positioning as objectionable and obscene is further complicated by how online platform content policies classify photographs and videos on the basis of their sexual suggestiveness. Most social media platforms, along with videotelephony services, disallow sexual content, with community standards policies labelling nudity,

sexual depiction, and exchange as objectionable or obscene. Even when such policies are impossible to implement on Zoom and Skype due to privacy restrictions, the bans exist as disclaimers of sorts. On TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, such content policies are vigilantly applied (Tiidenberg 2021; Paasonen and Sundén 2024). Algorithmically governed platform content policies pertaining to nudity and sex conflate a range of representational and communicative practices with the marker of pornography denoting obscenity, so that mundane images, from artworks to sex education materials and naked selfies, become classified as inappropriate, and are thus filtered out. Here, the dynamics of expansiveness and elusiveness play into one another, so that the expansive governance of sexual displays results in elusiveness in terms of what qualifies as porn and, consequently, in what the notion gets to stand for.

Following Kendrick, social media regulation extends to content and practices well exceeding the boundaries of porn as it has conventionally been construed as a realm of production, circulation, and consumption. A naked selfie, may, after all, be a communication device or quotidian documentation similar to shots taken of one's lunch or daily fashion choices, yet becomes classified as objectionable in accordance with the amount of skin shown. And, as suggested earlier, the dick pic – as literal as it may be in its pictorial content – can serve a range of social uses. Content filtering policies reaching beyond the pornographic then challenge Kendrick's framing of porn as that which becomes policed and removed from public view: flagged and removed images may just as well include medical imagery, photographs of fully clothed people sporting BDSM paraphernalia, or public statues featuring naked bodies.

It should be noted that social media moderation practices do not necessarily follow the content policies they are set to safeguard as over-moderation pertaining to nudity tends to be the norm – on Meta's platforms in particular. Moderation is primarily automated and algorithms are, by default, blind to context. Human moderators focusing on complaints of false flagging seldom reverse these decisions on the basis that nudity should be exceptionally allowed in educational and artistic contexts, for example. After the 2018 passing of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA–SESTA) law packages rendering platforms liable for the sexual content posted by users, community standards have grown stricter so as to basically fence off sexuality from the forms of sociality and exchange allowed by platforms (Paasonen and Sundén forthcoming). There is little for platforms to lose when over-moderating (rather than under-moderating) as sexual content is risky both for their corporate/brand images and for advertisement income (see Tiidenberg 2021).

In sum, the horizontal and extensive weeding out of sexual content equates all nudity with sex so that the category of offensive content traditionally occupied by pornography becomes both heterogeneous and absurdly broad. As it would hardly be productive to identify all content thus filtered out from networked consumption and circulation as 'pornographic', Kendrick's interpretative framework does not quite help in understanding these developments.

### **Porn: here, there, everywhere?**

As sexual content is ousted from social media, porn distribution is centralized in unprecedented ways on video-sharing platforms such as xVideos, Pornhub, and xHamster, the

operating principles of which have been built on trading in pirated content and user data. There is further centralization in ownership, with the parent company Aylo (formerly known as MindGeek) owning not only Pornhub but also some of its key competitors (RedTube, YouPorn, XTube) and production companies (Brazzers, Digital Playground, Sean Cody). Even as Aylo's business extends to porn production, its backbone consists of information technology work where job titles, and indeed practices, differ little from those of companies such as YouTube, the operating principles of which video aggregator sites emulate (Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light 2019b, 72–75; Rodeschini 2021).

Contemporary online porn is an issue of platforms and their governance, to which scholarly vocabulary building on the economies of print, film, and DVD distribution is poorly attuned (see, for example, Tarrant 2016). Nick Srnicek (2018, 43) defines platforms as 'digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact': as intermediaries, they bring together 'customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects'. Platforms link actors and markets, as well as constrain the exchanges occurring between them (Tiidenberg 2021, 383). They are further characterized by what Srnicek identifies as 'network effects', namely centralization on hubs with high volumes of user traffic where volume breeds volume and mass feeds mass. As 'more users beget more users', this cycle 'leads to platforms having a natural tendency towards monopolisation' (Srnicek 2018, 45) – a development illustrated by the hub traffic on Pornhub, Chaturbate, Livejasmin, and OnlyFans alike.

The platform ecology accommodates large social media giants, minoritarian sexual sites, end-to-end encrypted messaging services, and hook-up apps, among others, used for sexual expression and connecting. Within this, porn comprises just one area of sexual content, even if it is a diverse one. Or, to rephrase, given the myriad sexual practices playing out on online platforms, it is by no means clear what may qualify as pornography. For example, as live performances, webcam shows are classifiable as sexual media and commercial sex, but unlike the photographs, magazines, books, film reels, VHS tapes, DVDs, and streaming media that historically make up the markets of porn, they are not objects available for repeated consumption.

Also, what about Zoom masturbation sessions and group sex parties, WhatsApp and SnapChat sexting, video collages timed with popper use (Mercer 2017), the range of content distributed on OnlyFans, or, indeed, dick pics? If such practices are understood as porn, then considerable parts of the population could be categorized as pornographers, although only in ways that do away with both contextual nuance and generic specificity. The people engaging in such routines may, after all, see their activities as extensions of their sexual lives as forms of experimentation, play, and sociality, even as these function as sources of sexual titillation like the videos viewed on Pornhub. In addition, sex blogs, fan art galleries, and amateur erotica sites are all consumed for the purposes of masturbation both within and outside the genre marker of porn, leading to further porousness around the boundaries of the notion.

Just as the field of porn studies has taken shape – the launch of *Porn Studies* a decade ago marking a particular milestone that this special issue celebrates – the object of contemporary pornography is shiftier than ever. There is a point to calling porn 'porn', rather than resorting to euphemisms such as 'sexually explicit materials' or 'sexual stimuli' which aim for a more neutral scholarly tone but do not necessarily add clarity about what is being discussed (see, for example, Hald et al. 2013; Prause and Pfaus 2015). At the

same time, the moniker of porn does not quite cover the range of materials currently under circulation. There is even the risk of the notion orienting scholarly inquiry on historical terms, considering how porn has to date been defined as practices of production, distribution, consumption, and censorship.

I suggest that deploying porn as an assembling concept for sexual online content renders inquiry partial, both in terms of economies of production and monetization and of the content generated, shared, used, and experienced. Online sexual practices are not merely mediated but networked so as to pull users, media files, platforms, and user data into contact with one another. While such practices are not interactive by default – we may well just view and lurk – the overall principle of operation is one of leakiness, the constant exchange of information that Wendy Chun identifies as the basis of both communication and the internet: ‘In terms of networks, leaks are not accidental; they are central. Without leaking information, there could be no initial connection’ (2016, 51).

Returning to the topic of dick pics, understanding these as objects of networked exchanges provides a way of foregrounding the contexts of their sharing: the kinds of contact established between creators, content, end-devices, platforms, and audiences, as well as the uncontrollability – the leaking, the unpredictable circulation – that all this entails. Dick pics are native objects of networked media that thrive on social media backchannels. While they are technically subject to the same regulation as porn clips within the horizontal logic of platform policies, their distribution through direct messaging works to circumvent some of this content governance – not least if Meta introduces encryption to direct messages on Facebook and Instagram as planned, so as to add considerable opacity to sexual exchanges. Dick pics can be seen as moving in and out of pornographic uses without being fixed in these terms. They are further illustrative of the blurred and porous boundaries of privacy in how they are shared and received – out of the blue, as part of sexual play, or as objects of amusement and hate. As such, they are good objects for thinking through networked sexual exchanges and their dis/connections with the genre of porn.

### Higher and lower grounds

My concern here with the possibilities and limitations of porn as a point of reference is distinct from that posed by Linda Williams (2014, 34), for whom the issue is one of academic inquiry becoming too closely and comfortably aligned with the vocabulary of the porn industry, rather than signalling what she deems ‘the higher ground of a more scholarly, distanced and critical approach’. Instead of seeking a higher ground, I argue that the moniker of porn is simultaneously too expansive in its uses and too partial in what it refers to. The question is how academic terminology can manage to address the phenomena studied, and how scholars can produce knowledge concerning them. Labels and genre markers come steeped in histories and values, orienting inquiry and ways of classifying their objects of study.

There is hardly any immediate risk of porn production grinding to a halt, or consumers losing interest in so-called adult entertainment: porn is surely not an endangered field of culture. It nevertheless remains necessary to distinguish between different forms and functions of sexual content production if we are to understand what is going on in terms of diverse platforms, contexts, and formats of networked sexual exchange. Here,

porn remains a particular point of reference in the face of the diversity of networked sexual practices and the ways in which people make sense of them. The challenge remains as to how scholarly vocabulary can account for diverse forms of sexual media that are not simply porn, yet intertwine with it, while not merely dismissing the complexity and diversity of porn as genre.

Digital and mediated intimacies have been proposed as concepts for understanding a range of online exchanges and content encompassing, but not limited to, porn – from sexting to sex education, live-streaming, and the uses of hook-up apps (for example, Attwood, Hakim and Winch 2017; Ley and Rambukkana 2021; Ruberg and Brewer 2022). These terms are loose and expansive enough to accommodate a range of concerns and analyses connected to mediated sex and they can be highly useful in introducing the topic of porn into discussions where it is often excluded, such as sexual health or public policy. At the same time, the term foregrounds intimacy, not only as a popular euphemism for sex but, in accordance with its thesaurus definitions, as suggestive of closeness, affinity, and privacy. Yet sex is by no means necessarily experienced as intimate: the sharing of dick pics, attending a strip show, or having casual sex can be many things – intense, routine, meaningful, just fun – but not by definition intimate.

How or to whom, for example, is a photograph of one's penis, taken with a mobile phone and shared through Instagram's Direct Messenger, intimate? The visual subject matter of an erect penis can be classified as sexually explicit and a dick pic can be shared with a potential partner as a form of flirtation, suggestion, and advert for one's physical goods so as to be embedded in mutual dynamics of desires – and be intimate in this sense. But the very same photograph can be sent to a complete stranger alongside rape and death threats as a tool of sexualized violence. While the aim here would be to get under the recipient's skin, neither the act of sending the picture nor the relationship desired between the sender and the recipient are best described as entailing a sense of closeness. An interconnection may momentarily take place, and vulnerabilities may emerge, yet intimacy takes on a somewhat metaphorical meaning. A similar argument can be made of online porn clips and webcam shows: there can be intimacy in viewing them, or maybe not. When used as both descriptive concepts for networked phenomena and as analytical concepts for making sense of these, the notion of intimacy – or porn, for that matter – does not necessarily connect or coincide with how the people involved in all of this experience and label things: there can be glaring gaps between academic conceptualizations and everyday practices.

There is little doubt that intimacies of all sorts are built, maintained, and disrupted on the online platforms through which lives are managed; from hooking up to connecting at a distance, keeping track of one's children, or finding fetish titillations. With ubiquitous network connectivity, the distinction between online and offline that was constitutive of early internet inquiry has changed, with 'online' becoming a constant in how lives are navigated, and how everyday lives work. This means that networked connections and platforms operate infrastructurally to hold up sexual lives and life-worlds, and that, conversely, our lives are mediated to different degrees. If and when networked sexual exchanges are seen as part and parcel of sociality – rather than something excluded and banned through content policies – they are not necessarily identified as distinctly sexual inasmuch as patterns in forms of relating, expressing oneself, and being seen (Paasonen et al. 2023). If sexual lives cannot be pulled apart

from sexual media, these being intermeshed, where does this lead in terms of academic vocabularies?

Rather than retreating to a scholarly ‘higher ground’ and deploying academic classifications from the ‘top down’, I argue for the productivity of paying attention to the vocabularies in use across platforms and user cultures to describe sexual entanglements of various kinds in order to better understand what they mean, how they work, and what they might be. My suggestion is not to blur descriptive and analytical terminologies but to listen with a keen ear to how practices, content, and experiences are discussed so as to keep analytical concepts in necessary motion and to avoid classifications that may come across as normative and evaluative – not least when bearing in mind the moral, political, and aesthetic concerns historically associated with the notion of porn, and the stakes involved in applying the term to a range of materials, the authors of which may not associate their output with it. This call for contextual care applies to the notion of porn, the future shapes of which are yet to unfold, just as it does to dick pics as communication devices and cultural symbols, and to both fleeting and persistent experiences of networked intimacy.

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