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Review

Unsolicited dick pics: Erotica, exhibitionism or entitlement?

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ABSTRACT

Technologically mediated forms of sexual abuse have been the subject of extensive media discussion in the 2000s. Arguably, digital media have transformed sexual abuse. Cultural anxieties around sexting and revenge porn have been accompanied by an emerging body of scholarly literature on image-based sexual abuse and harassment. Concern with image-based sexual abuse has centered on the non-consensual distribution of private nude images of women and girls via digital media, which is often represented as harmful, dangerous for the woman or girl in the image, and potentially criminal. Conversely, scholars have just begun to turn their attention to men's intentional distribution of unsolicited images of their penises to women. In this article, we consider the theoretical concepts of the continuum of sexual violence and sexual and aggrieved entitlement alongside the interdisciplinary literature on image-based sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and exhibitionism to propose a future research agenda for understanding the contemporary phenomenon of men sending unsolicited dick pics to women. We argue that dick pics merit scholarly attention as an emerging cultural practice.

Introduction

New media offer avenues for positive expressions of sexuality, new ways of seeking support in the face of sexual victimization, and opportunities for abuse prevention and advocacy (Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Salter, 2017; Vitis & Gilmour, 2017). However, digital media also offer new ways to abuse others and can exacerbate the impact of violence against women (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017; Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Salter, 2016). Technologically mediated forms of sexual abuse have been the subject of extensive media discussion in the 2000s. Popular cultural anxieties around “sexting” and “revenge porn” have been accompanied by an emerging body of scholarly literature on “image-based sexual abuse” (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Powell, Henry, & Flynn, 2018) and online gender-based and sexual harassment (Fox & Tang, 2017; Jane, 2017; Penny, 2013; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). So far, this discussion has largely omitted men's distribution of unsolicited dick pics to women.

“Dick pic” is the colloquial term for men sending images of their own penises via email, messaging application, or text (Salter, 2017; Waling & Pym, 2017). This article is focused on men's distribution of unsolicited dick pics to women because numerous women have repeatedly complained about the practice and many have explicitly demanded that men stop sending them (see for example Lynn, n.d.; Angienew1990, 2017; Hunt, 2017; Kohn, 2017; Merbrija, 2016; Ryan,

2013). As sociocultural meanings of sexual images and behavior vary according to contexts such as sex, gender, and sexuality, women's experiences of receiving unsolicited dick pics merit dedicated consideration. In this article, we argue that the distribution of unsolicited dick pics deserves scholarly attention as a social phenomenon. We review the potential theoretical contributions of the continuum of sexual violence and sexual and aggrieved entitlement to understanding men's distribution of unsolicited images of their penises to women. Next, we consider the applicability of the extant literature on image-based sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and exhibitionism to the intentional dissemination of dick pics to non-consenting parties. Finally, we propose a future research agenda for understanding the phenomenon and its cultural implications.

Theoretical frameworks

The continuum of sexual violence

Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence (1988, 2017) provides fruitful tools for thinking about the varieties of sexual abuse and image distribution online. First articulated by Stanko in 1985, the concept of a continuum of unsafety challenges pervasive and persistent notions about violence and abuse against women as rare and in clear conflict with social and cultural norms. Stanko (1985, p. 1) foregrounded the

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everyday, commonplace nature of women's experiences of men's behavior that “women themselves perceive and/or experience as intimidating, threatening, coercive, or violent,” drawing connections between “the brutal rape, the sexually harassing comments, the slap on the face, the grab on the street- all forms of men's threatening, intimidating, and violent behaviour- are reminders to women of their vulnerability to men.” This understanding links sexual violence, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment in a continuum of behaviors that share a common etiology and cumulative impact that shapes people's everyday lives (Stanko, 1990). Kelly (1988, p. 75) explained that, “The concept of a continuum can enable women to make sense of their experiences by showing how ‘typical’ and ‘aberrant’ male behaviour shade into one another.” The continuum of sexual violence is a relevant concept when discussing unsolicited dick pics, which we suggest are simultaneously considered to be common, no big deal, and deviant (see also Waling & Pym, 2017).

Kelly (1988) sought to draw attention to the ways the social construction of heterosexuality contributes to the likelihood that men will use sexual violence against women in order to critique and de-naturalize socially constructed heterosexuality. Kelly (1988) suggested that developing critical awareness of the coercive aspects of normative expressions of heterosexuality was as essential to reducing sexual abuse as recognizing rape and other extreme forms of physical violence. As Gillett (2018, p. 2) put it,

The key points of the continuum of sexual violence are: gendered forms of abuse and harassment are not rare crimes. They are experienced by the majority of women and are therefore ‘ordinary’, rather than ‘aberrant’; ‘ordinary’ experiences of abuse have cumulative effects that can be as important as physical violence; and the focus on the extreme forms of physical violence that are recognised as ‘aberrant’ distracts us from addressing mainstream cultural values that effectively normalise abuse.

This formulation serves to refocus our attention on the contributing factors to gendered violence, including the normalization of everyday experiences of sexualized aggression and non-consensual sexual behavior. The rise of unsolicited dick pics is one phenomenon scholars can examine in order to uncover some of the persistent contradictions in contemporary norms around gender and sexuality. As Gillett (2018, p. 3) argued, “What is needed is a framework that can account for the connections between multiple intrusive behaviours and allows us to focus on experiences that have largely escaped the critical gaze of researchers and the public.” One key aspect of patriarchal heterosexuality that deserves critical attention and may be relevant to understanding men's distribution of unsolicited dick pics is entitlement.

Entitlement

Entitlement has been found to contribute to a variety of forms of abuse and harassment against women (Bouffard, 2010; Cairns, 1993; Hill & Fischer, 2001; Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, & Dunkle, 2011; Parkinson, 2017; Richardson, Simons, & Futris, 2017). Anecdotal evidence from online discussion indicates that entitlement may also play a role in men's distribution of unsolicited dick pics. Two forms of entitlement which may be particularly germane include sexual entitlement and aggrieved entitlement. Sexual entitlement refers to the socially constructed belief that men are entitled to sex (Beech & Mann, 2002; Bouffard, 2010; Cairns, 1993; Pemberton & Wakeling, 2009). Aggrieved entitlement refers to the anger men experience when they are deprived of patriarchal privileges they feel they deserve, or feel their cultural superiority is under threat (Kimmel, 2013).

Sexual entitlement

Anna Pemberton and Helen Wakeling (2009, p. 289) define sexual entitlement as “believing one has a right to sex.” They cite Beech and Mann's (2002, p. 266) explanation that sexual entitlement is “a type of

thinking in which the offender considers that he is superior to, and more important than, others. Therefore, he sees himself as being entitled to have sex when he wants from those who are less powerful/less important than himself.” Sexual entitlement is one of the cognitive distortions that has been repeatedly found to be correlated with sexual abuse of women and children (Beech & Mann, 2002; Bouffard, 2010; Cairns, 1993; Parkinson, 2017; Pemberton & Wakeling, 2009). Cairns (1993) argues that sexual entitlement contributes to relational dynamics wherein the entitled person's sexual relationships serve to fill a need for power and meet their own needs. This dynamic may be reflected in sending unsolicited dick pics, as reflected in online comments like:

If you just start sending the dicks right away, that's something that turns you on. It's not about getting someone else off. If I haven't had any message from you before, and I just see “hey bro” ...and they get like 10 pictures of a penis, like...that's just like what you're into, that's not about turning someone else on. Like...probably no one wants to see that dick.

(Max, quoted in Marie, 2016)

Pemberton and Wakeling (2009) note that sexual entitlement beliefs contribute to anger and violence when sex is denied. They found that the most commonly reported entitlement views expressed by the forty rapists and sexual murderers in their sample were: “‘only I matter’, ‘it's my birthright’ and ‘I have the power’.” These entitlement views seem to reflect a hypermasculinity, or male superiority” (Pemberton & Wakeling, 2009, p. 301). This understanding of sexual entitlement as a form of cognitive distortion points to the connections between enduring patriarchal cultural norms and men's perpetration of sexual abuse.

Rape and sexual murder are clearly not of the same magnitude as sending unsolicited images of penises. However, as Kelly (1988, 2017) and Cairns (1993) observed, the beliefs that reproduce men's unwanted sexual behavior are likely shared across domains. Marshall and Barbaree (1990) explained these dynamics in their integrated theory of the etiology of sexual offending, which considered biological, situational, psychological, cultural, and social factors. They argue that childhood socialization around attitudes and behavior contribute to prosocial or antisocial sexual schemas. “These mental sets will also be strongly influenced at this time by the sociocultural attitudes expressed by the society at large, and these influences may remain as cogent factors throughout the individual's life” (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990, p. 260). Significantly, Marshall and Barbaree (1990) recognized that antisocial attitudes originate in part in mainstream culture.

Aggrieved entitlement

Michael Kimmel links men's entitlement to the backlash against feminism and other progressive social gains. Kimmel (2013) uses the term “aggrieved entitlement” to describe some white American men's reaction against the perceived gains of minorities such as women, racialized minority men, queer women and men, and immigrants. Kimmel (2013, p. 18) writes, “It is that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful. You feel yourself to be the heir to a great promise, the American Dream, which has turned into an impossible fantasy for the very people who were supposed to inherit it.” According to Kimmel (2013), aggrieved entitlement is experienced by those men who feel like victims of structural inequality despite having a disproportionate share of power and resources. He argues that aggrieved entitlement is not elicited by absolute poverty or lack of resources. Instead, the key to aggrieved entitlement is the feeling of being cheated of something which you deserve. The outrage elicited by this feeling is turned toward those who have less political power as part of an attempt to reclaim the privileges of a romanticized past. While Kimmel's (2013) focus is on the downwardly mobile white male lower middle class in the United States, the dynamics of aggrieved entitlement can also be observed in other contexts.

Unsolicited dick pics may be part of some men's efforts to resist women's increased power to control courtship interactions in the face of cultural shifts in expectations around dating and hooking up. As Thompson (2016, 2018) argued, men's harassing behavior on dating apps, including unsolicited dick pics, may be related to the increased rejection they experience online combined with the "heightened amount of control that women have over online conversations (politeness norms can make it more difficult to assertively deflect romantic advances in face-to-face conversations, nudging women toward showing greater politeness than they might otherwise feel)." Some men may respond to these challenges to the patriarchal prerogative to take the lead in courtship using gendered and sexual aggression (Thompson, 2018).

Discussing their theory of patriarchal peer support for image-based sexual abuse, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2016, p. 5) note that "all-male groups encourage, justify, and support the abuse of women by their members to repair 'damaged patriarchal masculinity' caused by current or former female partners". In the case of women who exit relationships, male peer support motivates men to 'lash out against the women ... they can no longer control', and image-based sexual abuse is an effective way to do so (internal citations omitted). While DeKeseredy & Schwartz focus solely on the distribution of sexual images of women without their consent, the dynamics of patriarchal peer support may also apply to men's distribution of unsolicited pictures of their penises as a way to express aggrieved entitlement.

As Bouffard (2010) points out, entitlement measures are one of few tools that can distinguish between sexually aggressive and non-aggressive men. Bouffard observes that entitlement is a useful concept for making the connections between individual and cultural contributing factors to sexual aggression and abuse. As DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1993, p. 396) put it, "male actions, values, and beliefs are microsocial expressions of broader patriarchal forces." Whether the focus is on sexual entitlement or aggrieved entitlement, men's feelings of thwarted entitlement in relationships with women are one factor that deserves further attention when studying unsolicited dick pics.

Literature informing future research

Research on men's intentional distribution of unsolicited images of their own genitals has been extremely limited. Psychologists March and Wagstaff (2017) investigated what psychologists call "dark personality traits" among people who had sent unsolicited explicit images. They reported that male sex, self-rated mate value, and trait Machiavellianism were correlated with sending unsolicited explicit images. However, they didn't investigate the context in which images were distributed or the meaning of the behavior for senders or recipients. Accordingly, it is not clear how this study can inform future research on men's distribution on non-consensual dick pics to women. Three more developed areas of literature that potentially inform future research include image-based sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and exhibitionism.

Image-based sexual abuse

Image-based sexual abuse has become a popular frame for talking about non-consensual sharing of sexual images online. Image-based sexual abuse is often represented as dangerous for the women and girls depicted, harmful, and potentially criminal (Citron & Franks, 2014; Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Salter, 2017). Scholars investigating the unauthorized distribution of private nude images have characterized it as a gendered phenomenon, noting that the associated social harms attach themselves more readily to women than men (see for example Henry & Powell, 2015; Jane, 2017; Salter, 2016). While unsolicited dick pics could fit into definitions of technology facilitated sexual violence like that proposed by Henry and Powell (2015, p. 759): "(a) the unauthorized creation and distribution

of sexual images (including non-consensual sexting or "revenge porn"), (b) the creation and distribution (actual or threatened) of sexual assault images, (c) the use of a carriage service to procure a sexual assault, (d) online sexual harassment and cyberstalking, (e) gender-based hate speech, and (f) virtual rape", scholarly and policy discussion of adult image-based sexual abuse is overwhelmingly focused on non-consensual distribution rather than non-consensual receipt of images. We argue that intentionally distributing one's own unsolicited dick pics to non-consenting parties may also be a form of image-based sexual abuse.

As with other forms of sexual behavior, context matters. It is important to distinguish between image-based sexual abuse and sexting. Most research on sexting is focused on young people's participation in the exchange of sexually explicit or suggestive material without exploring whether this behavior is consensual (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Salter, 2017). Albury and Crawford (2012) suggest that the meaning of sexting is highly culturally and context dependent, so social and policy responses to it need to consider the meaning of image exchange, including the consent of those involved. Likewise, Reed, Tolman, and Ward (2016) argue that similar lifetime prevalence rates for people who have experienced any item on a "continuum of digital behaviors that could cause harm" can obscure meaningful differences in the experiences and implications of those behaviors, rendering it essential to investigate the meaning and impact of behaviors in addition to their prevalence and frequency. In other words, we can't assume the meaning of online behavior without asking about it directly. Experiences of identical behaviors may well differ based on the relationship and cultural contexts in which they occur and these contexts may vary significantly across age, sex, sexuality, and other social categories. Accordingly, research designed to explore the ways people understand and experience consensual and non-consensual sexual image distribution behaviors in diverse contexts would help us to better understand their meaning and impact.

The definition of image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017) cited at the beginning of this paper illustrates how criminologists and legal scholars have prioritized the non-consensual distribution of private nude images via digital media rather than the intentional distribution of unsolicited genital images. While legal scholars McGlynn and Rackley (2017) applied Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence to image-based sexual abuse, their discussion does not include the intentional distribution of images of one's own genital images to non-consenting parties. This is an interesting gap as the continuum of sexual violence includes flashing as an important behavior on the continuum due to its frequency and minimization despite women's negative reactions to it. As we discuss below, flashing is arguably a form of sexual harassment and dick pics are the contemporary equivalent of flashing online.

Sexual harassment

Unsolicited dick pics are one of many forms of intrusive and harassing behavior online (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Gillett, 2018; Jane, 2017; Salter, 2017). They are part of a broader escalation in the culture wars over feminism and sexual violence, characterized by increasing misogyny and feminist activism on and offline (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Dating apps appear to be a common site of dickpicking, which is just one of the behaviors women are resisting online (Shaw, 2016; Thompson, 2018; Tweten, 2015; Vitis & Gilmour, 2017). Scholars have analyzed multiple online campaigns dedicated to resisting sexual harassment online by aggregating hostile posts to make the scope of abuse more visible, identify patterns in sexual abuse and harassment, or mock or shame senders of unsolicited dick pics and other abusive messages (Thompson, 2018). For example, on the Instagram account *Instagramniepants*, Anna Gensler responds to unsolicited dick pics and abusive messages by posting unflattering drawings of the senders alongside their comments (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017). Alexandra Tweten's *Bye Felipe* uses Instagram in the cause of "calling out dudes who get

hostile when rejected or ignored” (Shaw, 2016, p. 3), highlighting their entitlement (Tweten, 2015). Shaw (2016) content-analyzed *Bye Felipe* postings and found that some men send unsolicited dick pics alongside unsolicited sexual comments and threats of physical abuse following rejection. Men also sent dick pics to women who ignored them (Shaw, 2016). These dynamics appear to mimic the dynamics of sexual harassment in other contexts, imbuing multiple social spaces with hostile dynamics. Tweten (2015) notes that *Bye Felipe* makes visible the links between more public forms of abuse like street sexual harassment and the harassment and abuse men direct at women in the context of dating apps.

The omission of dick pics from emerging research on image-based sexual abuse is surprising given that offline forms of genital exposure to non-consenting parties, colloquially known as “flashing,” have long been criminalized as a non-contact sexual offense. For example, in Australia the *Queensland Summary Offences Act 2005* - sect 9 defines the offense of wilful exposure as follows:

- (1) A person in a public place must not wilfully expose his or her genitals, unless the person has a reasonable excuse.
- (2) A person who is so near a public place that the person may be seen from the public place must not wilfully expose his or her genitals so that the person's genitals may be seen from the public place, unless the person has a reasonable excuse.
- (3) It is a circumstance of aggravation for this section for a person to wilfully expose his or her genitals so as to offend or embarrass another person.

This offense criminalizes public or public-adjacent genital exposure with an aggravating circumstance of causing offense or embarrassment. Hamner and Saunders (1984) and McNeill (1987) described flashing as a form of “visual violence.” In the 1980s, Wise and Stanley (1987, p. 99) included flashing in their list of “sledgehammer” behaviors that are easily recognized as sexual harassment, along with murder, rape, battering and incest. Research has documented negative effects of flashing, suggesting that it may be more than a nuisance despite often being unaccompanied by contact sexual offenses (Clark, Jeglic, Calkins, & Tatar, 2016). For example, Cox (1988, p. 230) found that 33% of his sample of eight hundred and forty-six college women reported experiencing indecent exposure in their lifetime. While 32% of these women reported that their first experience of flashing was not at all distressing (p. 231), 38% described the event as moderately to severely distressing (p. 231). Sixty-four percent of these women reported that the most distressing episode was when the flasher was a stranger, and 19% reported the most distressing incident was when the flasher was an acquaintance. Riordan (1999, p. 311) found that 48% of her sample of seventy-two women reported experiencing indecent exposure. Twenty-eight percent of the victims reported that the incident increased their fear of sexual crime and 28% of the victims reported their movements or social activities had been affected by this experience (p. 313). Riordan reported that in addition to the initial shock, flashing has a negative and lasting impact for some of those who experience it.

While unsolicited dick pics may be seen as less disturbing or harmful than flashing because the sender is not physically right in front of you, many dating apps and other social media use physical proximity to connect users using GPS technology, meaning the sender may be nearby and have access to information about the recipient's location. In addition, some dating apps and other social media platforms require real names to be used, meaning the sender may know who you are and, potentially where you live and work. Since some dating apps are networked with other social media, senders may also have access to your broader social network. Similarly to obscene phone calls and flashing, unsolicited dick pics may be disturbing because recipients do not know what else the sender will do. As the research on exhibitionism indicates, these behaviors may in fact be related.

Exhibitionism

Above, we discussed the potential contributions of the research on image-based sexual abuse and sexual harassment to understanding dick pics. Another body of research that is potentially relevant to the distribution of unsolicited dick pics is that on exhibitionism. Despite extensive critiques of psychiatry as sexist and heterosexist (e.g. Chesler, 1972; Drescher, 2015), psychiatric research is one of the largest bodies of literature on exposing genitals to others without their consent. Psychiatric research defines exhibitionism as the compulsive exposure of genitalia at inappropriate times and places with negative consequences for the exhibitionist (Balon, 2016). In a recent text on paraphilias, Balon (2016, p. 3) suggests that the term “cyberflashing” could be used to refer to sending a picture of one's genitals to an unsuspecting person online. In psychiatry, exhibitionism is considered a paraphilia, or abnormal sexual desire (Clark et al., 2016). It is often researched alongside frotteurism and voyeurism, which are thought to share similar etiologies (Clark et al., 2016; Freund & Seto, 1998; Hopkins, Green, Carnes, & Campling, 2016; Långström & Seto, 2006). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition*¹ (American Psychological Association, 2013) describes exhibitionism as,

- a) over a period of six months, recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the exposure of one's genitals to an unsuspecting person, as manifested by fantasies, urges or behaviors b) the individual has acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Some scholars have reported that exhibitionists masturbate before, during or after the encounter (Balon, 2016; Hopkins et al., 2016). Other studies suggest exhibitionists intend their behavior as an attempt to initiate sexual intercourse (Freund, Watson, & Rienzo, 1988).

In one of few general population studies on exhibitionism available, just over 3% of Swedish adults (4.1% of men and 2.1% of women) reported having been sexually aroused by exposing their genitals to a stranger (Långström & Seto, 2006, p. 427). The etiology of exhibitionism is not clear, but psychiatric research has highlighted correlations with other issues such as: other psychological problems, hypersexuality, antisocial personality disorders, alcohol use disorder, and pedophilia (Balon, 2016). Långström and Seto (2006, p. 434) found exhibitionism to be correlated with “psychological problems, substance use, and sexual risk-taking or novelty-seeking” in their non-clinical population sample.

The most prominent psychiatric theory to explain exhibitionism is “courtship disorder” (Freund & Watson, 1990). Courtship disorder posits that exhibitionism, voyeurism, frotteurism, and certain types of rape are all expressions of the same underlying disturbance in the regulatory system (Freund & Seto, 1998). Freund and Watson (1990, p. 590) describe these paraphilias as distortions of “normal courtship processes” which they describe as:

- (a) location and first appraisal of a suitable partner; (b) pretactile interaction, consisting mainly of looking, smiling, posturing, and talking to a prospective partner; (c) tactile interaction, and (d)

¹ The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is an American diagnostic handbook published by the American Psychiatric Association. It is a product of the professional culture in the organisation at the time of publication, with the most recent edition produced by input from a committee of more than 160 people. As such the DSM is deeply shaped by the theories, disciplinary assumptions, and methodological preferences in psychiatry at the time. The DSM and the field of psychiatry has been extensively critiqued for sexism and heteronormativity, for example pathologizing conditions (including homosexuality) now understood as forms of natural variation rather than diseases (see for example Drescher, 2015, Levine, Kamin, & Levine, 1974 and Stein et al., 2010). However, it remains widely used in psychiatric practice and influential well beyond its diagnostic purpose in informing the general public about psychology.

effecting genital union.

Despite this rather cartoonish characterization of courtship, popular discussion online seems to endorse this understanding of dick pics, speculating that men send photos of their penises to women without their consent in the hopes that they will elicit sexual interest or at least reciprocal photo exchange (e.g. Marie, 2016). Other studies propose that exhibitionism is more closely related to narcissism, a personality disorder characterized as a continuous pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration and a lack of empathy (American Psychological Association, 2013), than courtship disorder (Lang, Langevin, Checkley, & Pugh, 1987).

To our knowledge, only one study has attempted to compare exhibitionistic behavior on and offline. Noting that the study of sexual image exchange using digital technology does not fit into any established theoretical frameworks, Kaylor, Jeglic, and Collins (2016) conducted an exploratory study of the prevalence and motives for young people's exhibitionistic behavior on and offline. Their study follows a change in the most recent version of the DSM (2013), the first to distinguish between exhibitionistic behavior and the psychiatric disorder of exhibitionism (Kaylor et al., 2016). They found that about a quarter of 949 young adult survey participants had ever sent a photo of themselves exposing their penis, breasts, or vagina to someone using technology. 8% of women and 10% of men reported having sent such an image to someone they only knew online (p. 1156). Five percent (n = 56) of their participants reported they had “ever flashed their nude or partially nude body parts by exposing their genitals (breasts, penis, or vagina) in a public place (public urination not included).” A third of these participants also reported sending nude photos (p. 1157). Kaylor et al. note that the prevalence of sending nude images to partners indicates that this has become part of the flirting repertoires of young people, and that “most participants engaging in technological and traditional sexual behaviors are engaging in normal young adult dating behaviors.” However, “it appears that in some cases the combination of engaging in technological sexual behaviors, as well as behaviors similar to traditional exhibitionism, may be indicative of an electronic manifestation of a paraphilic disorder” (2016, p. 1161). However, measurement issues limit the interpretability of their findings for our inquiry. Most importantly for our purposes, Kaylor, Jeglic and Collins did not ask whether the exchange of images was consensual or not.

Conclusion

The extant research on image-based sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and exhibitionism provide resources for future research on the non-consensual distribution of dick pics. In addition, theoretical frameworks such as the continuum of sexual violence and aggrieved and sexual entitlement may be applicable to a subset of online sexual image exchange. Cultural norms around non-consensual sexual activity are contradictory. Empirical research is needed to tease out the competing cultural understandings of men's distribution of dick pics online. On the one hand, sexual harassment and sexual assault are increasingly condemned. On the other hand, many people continue to regard some types of non-consensual sexual behavior as normal or acceptable. Men sending unsolicited dick pics is one example of such contradictory social norms. Women overwhelmingly object to receiving unsolicited dick pics, both in public discourse and their individual responses to the men distributing them. At the same time, many women and men persistently claim that men do not understand their unsolicited dick pics are unwanted. This paradox begs investigation.

So far, most research on image-based sexual abuse is focused on images that are non-consensually produced or distributed without the consent of the person in the image. That is, if a person takes a photo of their own genitals and intentionally distributes it to non-consenting recipients, it is not currently part of scholarly discussions on image-

based sexual abuse. This is a conceptual oversight that narrows and distorts Kelly's (1988) theory of the continuum of sexual violence. This should not be misconstrued as an argument to criminalize all forms of abuse along the continuum of sexual violence. Kelly's (1988) argument is quite the opposite, that attention to women's lived experiences is required in order to recognize, critique, and challenge everyday assumptions and behaviors around gender and sexuality.

Kelly (1988) and her feminist contemporaries deliberately discussed physical and non-physical, stranger and non-stranger, private and public forms of abuse, including forms of harassment such as flashing, to emphasize the continuity and normalization of a variety of abusive and intrusive behaviors. Kelly's (1988) sexual violence continuum includes obscene phone calls and flashing as part of the overall hostile environment that women experience, with adverse effects on their overall sense of safety and empowerment. Sending unsolicited dick pics may carry a similar range of contextualized meanings and impacts, decreasing women's perceptions of safety and reminding them of their status as targets for sexualized aggression. As a common form of intimate intrusion, unsolicited dick pics draw attention to the privately experienced sexual aggression that women experience across multiple social contexts. They also highlight the reality that many men use dating and other important social contexts as opportunities to abuse women. These dynamics point to gendered hierarchies of power and the persistent role of abuse and implicit and explicit threats of violence in their maintenance.

Future research

To our knowledge no study to date has investigated men's or women's experiences of men's distribution of unsolicited dick pics to women in depth. The dearth of research on unsolicited dick pics relative to copious popular discussion is curious, and points to an opportunity to develop scholarly explanations for the behavior and responses to it. Empirical research is needed to assess the nature, meaning, and impact of men's distribution of unsolicited dick pics, women's responses to them, and what this phenomenon can tell us about gender relations.

Men are often “invisible when their behavior is socially undesirable and might raise questions about the appropriateness of male privilege” (Johnson, 2005, p. 155). Future research on dick pics could help remedy this invisibility. Empirical research is needed to understand who sends and receives unsolicited genital images. What are the contexts in which they are distributed? What platforms and devices do dickpickers use to distribute unsolicited images? What is the timing of sending such images? Is it a form of first contact or does it follow perceived rejection or thwarted entitlement? What do men who send the images say about when, where, why and how they do it and what they hope to accomplish? What do the recipients of unsolicited dick pics say about the experience? What changes, if any, would they like to see from the men who send them, platforms, criminal justice systems, and the general public? It is possible that it will be difficult to recruit men who send unsolicited dick pics for research purposes. However, previous research on sexuality, dating, exhibitionism, criminal offending, and other sensitive topics has proved feasible when well designed. Other sources of data about this phenomenon might include online discussions that already exist, research with recipients of the images, police files, and social media platform records of complaints and changing policy responses.

While objective prevalence measures of any type of sexual abuse are difficult to achieve, scholars can use multiple research methods to gather empirical evidence about unsolicited dick pics and their implications. As with other forms of gendered behavior, qualitative research is needed to understand dickpickers and recipients of unsolicited dick pics' understanding of the behavior and its impact. While the use of behavioral question items are important due to the wide range of interpretations possible when discussing distribution of genital images, it is also important to adopt a phenomenological approach that can

accommodate the meanings of the experience for those involved. As with sexual assault and harassment measures, phenomenological, behavioral, and legal definitions offer different contributions to understanding social phenomena. Individual studies may use one of these approaches to defining the issue, but multiple approaches will be required in order to build an interpretable body of literature that provides meaningful information about this cultural phenomenon. Ambiguous and double-barrelled question items are currently a problem in the research on sexual abuse, exhibitionism, and sexual harassment online. Nude, nearly nude, or partially nude are different and need to be distinguished. The exposure of genitals and breasts are also different. Aggregation of these categories conflates behavior that may have very different cultural meanings.

In order to avoid the well-documented pitfalls of measuring behaviors related to gendered forms of violence and abuse, researchers need to go beyond quantifying behaviors to understanding the context (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). If researchers are to contribute to an increased understanding of dick pics, consent and solicitation need to be included among issues investigated. To date, March and Wagstaff (2017) conducted the only survey that asked respondents about distribution of consensually produced images to non-consenting recipients. Clearly there is room for more research using a variety of methods and approaches. Feminist scholars have repeatedly asserted that you cannot simply create a list of behaviors that comprise sexual harassment or sexual assault because the context of the behavior determines the meaning of the activity (e.g. Dragiewicz, 2011; Vera-Gray, 2016; Wise & Stanley, 1987). Dick pics are not an exception to this rule.

Ultimately, the only way to learn about the meaning and impact of unsolicited dick pics is by asking those who send and receive them. In order to truly understand the impact of dick pics, we need to speak to female and male, queer and straight senders and recipients and listen to their perceptions of the experience. Like many other forms of human behavior, context is everything. Dick pics do not have a unitary meaning, and are distributed and received in a number of different contexts with variable meanings and implications. Critically considering the distribution of unsolicited dick pics in multiple contexts has the potential to reveal persistent and conflicting cultural norms around gender and sexuality.

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