

## Reading the Dick Pic Reparatively

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**Abstract:** Over the past several years, the dick pic has been featured prominently in the media and popular discourse. To date, much of the literature on dick pics has focused on what is more commonly known as the “unsolicited dick pic.” Such a perspective has led to dick pics being characterized, almost universally, as an outcome of men’s aggressive heterosexuality and misogynistic tendencies, and thus, the dick pic is seen as a way to make women feel uncomfortable and threatened in a variety of public and digital spaces. Likewise, psychological research has framed the sending of dick pics as only coming from narcissistic men, and that dick pics are the contemporary, digital form of the sexual pathology of flashing and exhibitionism. In this paper, we seek to open, or at least broaden, the conversation about the meanings and understandings of the dick pic, especially outside and beyond the framings of violence and pathology, or rather, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might understand as the paranoid reading of the dick pic. We do so by examining three social media sites that post and comment on dick pics. Accordingly, in this article, we seek to provide a reparative reading of the dick pic, specifically considering questions of desire, intimacy, the erotic, and vulnerability. Our approach to this study, thus, is to draw on queer theory to deconstruct and understand the phenomenon of the dick pic.

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## **Introduction**

Over the past several years, the dick pic has been featured prominently in media and popular discourse (Waling and Pym 70). Consider a random sample of headlines. *Vice* reports “men who send unsolicited dick pics are bigger narcissists, study finds” (2019), or *Wired* which “takes a Good Hard Look at Dick Pics” (2019). *The Guardian* announces that “the war on (unwanted) dick pics has begun” (2019). Truth be told, it seems as if we can find one headline after another warning us of a new advent in dick pic technology or yet another celebrity or politician caught up in a dick pic scandal. The dick pic has become ubiquitous among millennials and post-millennials and circulates as part of the cultural imagination of youthful sexualities. Brenda K. Wiederhold, for instance, observes that, “sexting,” of which the dick pic is but a part, “has gone mainstream. A study of 870 U.S. adults aged 18-72 showed that 88% had sexted in their lifetime” (627). Another study notes that “of the 697 participants, 80.9% (n=594) reported engaging in at least one sexting behavior (sent/posted, Internet sent/posted online, or shared/forwarded a sext) in their lifetime” (Hudson and Fetro 618). In these examples, the authors are chiefly concerned with *consensual* sexting. To date, much of the literature on dick pics has focused on what is more commonly known as the unsolicited dick pic, though as Waling and Pym note, solicited and unsolicited have become ubiquitous in discussing the dick pic (70). Such a perspective has led to dick pics being characterized, almost universally, as an outcome of men’s aggressive heterosexuality and misogynistic tendencies, and thus, the dick pic is seen to make women feel uncomfortable and threatened in a variety of public and digital spaces (Ringrose and Lawrence 687). Likewise, psychological research has framed the sending of dick pics as only coming from narcissistic men, and that dick pics are the contemporary, digital form of the sexual pathology of flashing and exhibitionism (Hayes and Dragiewicz 115; March and Wagstaff 3). While we, as authors, do not disagree with these perspectives—that is, we recognize that dick pics can be a form of sexualized violence—we also note that survey after survey points to the “mainstreaming” of sexting behaviors. Simply, as Michelle Drouin and colleagues have noted, “consensual adult sexting is no longer considered a deviant behavior” (753).

In this paper, we seek to open, or at least broaden, the conversation about the meanings and understandings of the dick pic, especially outside and beyond the framings of violence and pathology, or rather, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might understand as the paranoid reading of the dick pic. Accordingly, in this article, we seek to provide a reparative reading of the dick pic, specifically considering questions of desire, the erotic, and vulnerability. We agree with Sedgwick, from the outset, that “even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people” (*Epistemology* 25). That is, while we fully agree that some, perhaps many, perhaps even most are offended by these photographs, we also admit that this is not a universal truth. We are thus adding another avenue of research into a contemporary phenomenon that has in many ways gone mainstream. We do this by first providing an overview of theoretical considerations of men’s bodies and sex and sexuality, followed by an overview of research-to-date that has been conducted on the dick pic. We then provide our methodology, the use of Sedgwick’s reparative and paranoid readings to conduct a close textual analysis of three social media sites, [r/softies](https://www.tumblr.com/critiquemydickpic), [critiquemydickpic.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/critiquemydickpic), and [Were You Sent a Dick Pic You Didn’t Want.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/wereyou-sent-a-dick-pic-you-didnt-want). Our approach to this study, thus, is to draw on queer theory to deconstruct and understand the phenomenon of the dick pic.

## Men, Bodies & Sex

Before we venture into a discussion of dick pics, we feel it prudent to first discuss our approach to understanding men's sexualities and bodies more broadly, particularly that of heterosexual and cisgender men. Beasley's work on heterodoxies notes that men's sexuality and sexual practices, particularly that of heterosexual, cisgender men, are often always subsumed under the category of heteronormativity (682).[1] What Beasley means here is that when we talk about the sexuality of men, specifically heterosexual men, it is always understood in relation to problematic practices aiming to uphold a specific set of ideals that prioritize men's pleasure, sexual violence against women, and homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia (683). Beasley thus urges researchers to find ways to think about, and talk about, men's sexual practices that are not always already within a framework of heteronormativity (692).

Karioris and Allan are interested in thinking through sex-positive theories and the critical study of men and masculinities, which they see as being chiefly interested in and committed to a sex-negative politic (250). Karioris and Allan have asked, "so what of men's sexual practices, [...] how does one theorize these practices?" (250), echoing the questions posed by Beasley (692). Undoubtedly, especially in the age of #metoo, it is hard not to see men's sexualities as problematic, for indeed, sometimes they are. But surely, we must admit, that men, like women, can and do have sex that is "legal and consensual" as is essential to a sex-positive approach, and thus the sex is "healthy and positive" (Harwick 10). That said, such an approach to men's sexualities seems almost antithetical to how men's sex lives have been studied in critical studies of men and masculinities. In their paper, then, Karioris and Allan close by asking: "in what ways can we begin discussion men's sexual practices as part of a broader discussion about sexuality, and the ways that this impacts on relationships and relationality more broadly?" (253)

This question leads us to ask about the dick pic and its own relationality. For instance, a dick pic is rarely enjoyed by oneself, that is, one does not take a picture of one's own dick to enjoy. The dick pic is meant to be shared, in both consensual and non-consensual contexts, and in this paper we are interested in the former rather than the latter. Indeed, we might ask, what an approach to the dick pic that is sex-positive, informed by queer theory would look like. Likewise, we are not committed to the idea that the dick pic is inherently bad, especially given the reality that, as noted above, 88% of adults have admitted to sexting (Wiederhold 627). Other studies have noted similar numbers, for instance, Bauermeister and colleagues found that over 80% of their sample of young men who have sex with men had engaged in sexting (608), and Hudson and Fetro similarly found that nearly 81% of their sample of undergraduate students had engaged in sexting behavior (618). Certainly, the data shows that young people are sexting, but as noted in another study, "according to a recent national survey of 1182 Americans aged 18-54, 36% of adults reported that they planned to send explicit photos to their romantic partners on Valentine's Day" (Uhl et al. 51). While not the 80% of young people, it is striking that adults are *planning* on sexting, that is, there is forethought to their sexting. Simply, it seems obvious to state now that "consensual adult sexting is no longer considered a deviant behavior; in fact, some suggest it may even have possible relationship benefits" (Drouin et

al. 753). Indeed, we are interested in the “everydayness” of the dick pic, or the quotidian dick pic.

## Dick Pics: Violence & Pathology

Contemporary scholarship on dick pics seem to follow one of two trajectories. The first, is the framing of the dick pic as inherently violent. Dick pics have been set up as a form of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) (Henry and Powell 196). They are thus characterized as new way of sexually harassing women in online spaces (Vitis and Gilmore 336, Shaw 2), and as ways to reassert misogyny through use of the phallus (Ringrose and Lawrence 687).

In the second trajectory, dick pics are set up as pathology (Moor and Anderson 40; March and Wagstaff 3; Mandau 1; Oswald et al. 1). March and Wagstaff’s study of men who send unsolicited dick pics found that men who send dick pics are likely to be narcissistic and demonstrate dark personality traits (6). For March and Wagstaff, dick pics are the outcome of men who are overly confident and arrogant, a common theme in other studies (Mandau 1; Oswald et al. 1). For Hayes and Dragiewicz, dick pics are framed 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. (118)

It is difficult not to see the impulse towards criminality, deviance, and pathology that is found here. All of this is paranoid insofar as it is a theory of negative affect, and it is anticipatory—there is no possible reading outside of the prescribed reading. While we admit that the authors note that “the only way to learn about the meaning and impact of unsolicited dick pics is by asking those who send and receive them” (119), we note that few have sought to do this work, and we would contend that surely this cannot be *the only way*.

Such framings, as Waling and Pym (84) and Paasonen et al. (“The dick pic” 2) note, are dismissive of other ways of understanding the dick pic. Prior to the banning of adult content on Tumblr (Romano “Tumblr is Banning Adult Content”), websites such as Critique my dick pic and yourdicklooksgreatinthoseheels provided an alternative space for thinking through the dick pic, particularly the possibility for queering, body positivity, and reframing the dick pic as something to be desired (Waling and Pym 70; Waling “Erotic Subjectivity” 721; Paasonen et al. “The dick pic” 1; Paasonen et al. “NSFW” 1). Albury (1734) and Salter (2723) have also touched on alternate ways of considering the dick pic, whereby young men’s production of erotic imagery is much more flexible in its meaning, particularly in relation to concerns of sexualisation of culture (see Gill; Gill and Orgad). Recent work on gay and bisexual men’s experiences of sexting and erotic imagery also notes alternative meanings to the dick pic, whereby dick pics are understood as expected, and for some, accepted within certain gay and bisexual men’s sexual subcultures (Bauermeister et al. 606; Paasonen et al. “The dick pic” 1; Paramanathan 332; Tziallas 759).

More recent research has explored men's engagements with sexting and associated online dating practices, offering alternative understandings that are beginning to explore men's motivations and understandings (Haywood 131; Setty 1; Ravn et al. "Currency of Images" 1; Roberts and Ravn 1; Waling et al. "It's Nice to be Appreciated" 1). Taking a cue from Waling and Pym (84) who touch on the question of vulnerability, and Paasonen et al. ("The dick pic" 1), who consider the potential for a dick pic to be a figure of disgust and to be desired, to these ends and with this work in mind, we consider what alternative ways we can approach and theorise the dick pic.

## Methodology: Paranoid and Reparative Readings

Our methodology and close textual reading approach are framed by the work of the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who began to think about "other" ways of reading. In 1996, Sedgwick published a four-page article, "Queerer than Fiction," which acted as the introduction to a special issue of *Studies in the Novel*. This four-page article is the earliest published iteration of what would become her now canonical essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (277). In her initial essay, Sedgwick begins by noting that "for literary and cultural critics, the prevailing theoretical challenge has been to find ever more subtle and searching ways of implementing a hermeneutic of suspicion" and she observes that "in a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive or complaisant" (277).

So, we might ask, what does Sedgwick want? In her essay she affords a reading of Melanie Klein's "less differentiated, arguably less elegant concept of the paranoid position" because her understanding of this position is "always in the oscillatory context of a very different possible one, the depressive/reparative position" (278). In the reparative position, which is "an anxiety-mitigating achievement that an infant or adult only sometimes, and briefly, succeeds in inhabiting," one might find it

possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole (though not necessarily like any preexisting whole). Once assembled to one's own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment in turn. Among Klein's names for the reparative process is love. (278)

There is much to grapple with in Sedgwick's reparative position, for one, and this is important and often forgotten, it is not about permanence, a point that will become clearer when Sedgwick moves away from "a reparative reader" (279) to "a reparatively positioned reader" ("Paranoid Reading" 146), thus limiting the capacity for reparative to become essential. Accordingly, one cannot become "reparative," but rather these moments are fleeting and slip between and betwixt our fingers. Moreover, in this reparative position, which Sedgwick will ultimately spend the rest of her career defining, the goal is

ameliorative. As Sedgwick will write in this early essay, and as will appear with minor revisions in the following iterations,

To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious, paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall overtake the reader by surprise: to a reparative reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. ("Queerer than Fiction" 279)

As such, when confronted by the dick pic, as one of "the artifacts of a culture" (278), we may begin with the standard-now-canonical arguments that the artifact is an example of male aggression, or of sexualized violence, and it may well be these very things. But, what if, for instance, the recipient who received it, even if unsolicited, finds the image captivating, arousing, or attractive? This recipient is "surprised" by her or his reactions to the image. Indeed, in her 2003 rendering of this passage, this surprise is attached to a kind of newness, "shall ever come to the reader *as new*" (146). In the case of our aroused recipient, this feeling may very well be the newness that Sedgwick longs for and celebrates in her belief that surprises might well do us some good—even if the surprise is bad!

In her work, Sedgwick warns that "the vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives" (150). But, importantly, we agree with Sedgwick when she argues that "no less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects and ambitions, and risks" (150). Thus, we seek to move beyond what Sianne Ngai has called "ugly feelings," and perhaps move towards something closer to interest, pleasure, and a refusal to be consumed by the paranoid readings, which have thus far limited the study of dick pics (1).

In this article, then, we seek to draw on Sedgwick's "reparative position" to consider how we might look at dick pics without the paranoid impulse towards pathology and morality. Indeed, we are interested in "a very different impulse" ("Queerer than Fiction" 278) in our readings of the dick pic. Like Sedgwick, we understand the "reparative impulse" as being "additive and accretive" (279) to current paradigms and conceptions of the dick pic. Our suspicion is that if sexting has gone mainstream, then we are either all pathological or the criticism has become pathological in its paranoia. To do this, we outline our method of three case studies of social media sites, our rationale for their selection, and ethical considerations on conducting research on social media and dick pics.

## Method and Ethical Considerations

In what remains, we wish to think through a series of examples of the dick pic, and we seek to read each of these cases reparatively. To date, so much of the research has failed to imagine any complexity to the dick pic. That is, there has been no semiotic study of the dick pic, for instance, and there has been limited recognition, seemingly, that some people

might actually enjoy receiving a dick pic, or might be titillated by those images (see Waling and Pym 70; Paasonen et al. "The dick pic" 1, Paasonen et al. "NSFW" 1 as exceptions).

We use case studies to illustrate our points, drawing from three major public social media sources to demonstrate reparative ways of reading the dick pic outside of a violence/pathology binary. These include two now discontinued tumblr blogs, *Were You Sent A Dick Pic You Didn't Want?* and *Critique my dick pic*, and the reddit forum *r/Softies*. These three social media sites were selected as they each offered a different take on the dick pic that in varying ways, challenge the pathologising and violence narratives that underpin so much work surrounding dick pics.

Social media research, however, is a difficult space for researchers, with a number of inconsistencies as to how social media should be viewed in relation to ethics regulations and social media users as potential human research subjects (Moreno et al. 708). Townsend and Wallace note four key concerns regarding research and social media data, including concerning whether social media can be considered public or private, informed consent and how users understand and make sense of their use of social media websites, the ability to maintain anonymity through the reproduction of specific passages of social media text, and the risk of harm (5). Townsend and Wallace thus offer a framework in assessing whether social media research requires ethics approval through the lenses of legal, privacy and risk, and re-use and publication:

- Have you consulted the terms and conditions of the specific platform?
- Have you consulted the relevant disciplinary, funding, legal or institutional guidelines?
- Can the social media user reasonably expect to be viewed by strangers?
- Are the research participants vulnerable? (i.e. Children or vulnerable adults)
- Is the subject matter sensitive?
- Will the social media user be anonymized in published outputs?
- Can you publish or share the dataset?

Questions of what constitutes "public" and "private" is largely debated and the key consideration with social media research, with scholars advocating for a more nuanced approach to view this as a continuum, rather than a binary (Robards et al. 1). Indeed, Robards et al. note that intentionality of the user, i.e. who the post is intended for (the audience) should be a major consideration regarding social media research, to determine whether or not it can be said to be "public" or "private" (see also Fiesler and Proferes 1; Ravn et al. "Currency of Images" 1). Below, we discuss our three case studies, and how they fit into the "public" rather than "private" sphere.

### **Reddit**

Reddit is open access and does not require individuals to have an account to view its content, only if they wish to contribute. Its terms and conditions note that individuals who post content to Reddit grant it permission to "to use, copy, modify, adapt, prepare derivative works, distribute, perform, and display Your Content and any name, username,



voice, or likeness provided in connection with Your Content in all media formats and channels now known or later developed” (“Reddit User Agreement”).

As such, Reddit is considered public domain (See Robards 1; Van Der Nagel 1). Further, the nature of Reddit means that users must reasonably expect to be viewed by strangers and that their content is widely accessible, there are no options to make content private, which is different to social media websites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter which enable privacy settings.

While “r/softies” could be suggested to have sensitive content as it hosts men who post photos of their naked bodies, it is important to again reiterate that this content is publicly accessible, where such men intend others (strangers) to see these images to seek feedback. Further, “r/softies” was featured in two MEL Magazine articles exploring men’s motivations for engaging in reddit forums and practices of sharing photos of their penises (Smith; Moore).

### ***Tumblr***

Similar to Reddit, Tumblr’s terms and conditions also note that users who post grant them license to distribute content (“Terms of Service”). However, unlike Reddit, Tumblr[2] can be set to private, and individuals may choose to have blogs that require passwords and accounts. Nevertheless, the two blogs we review for case studies were publicly accessible blogs, where the intended audience was public. Ethics approval was also granted by La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee reference number [HREC S16-207] in 2016 in reviewing these blogs (see Waling and Pym 73).

The first, *Were You Sent A Dick Pic You Didn’t Want*, actively invited users to submit content, and engaged in the use of hashtags (#) which as Townsend and Wallace note, denotes widespread public engagement and therefore cannot be understood as an attempt to maintain privacy (5). The blog, as we discuss further below, also promotes public viewing and sharing of the material and therefore users cannot reasonably be expected to believe that their content is private.

The second, *Critique my dick pic*, was also a public-facing blog that invited users to submit photos to be publicly shared, including accepting paid requests and donations. Further, *Critique my dick pic*, and its creator Madeleine Holden, were featured in many news outlets and magazines (Holden; Massey; Meghan; Ro) furthering the public engagement of this blog.

### ***Lack of Images***

We grappled with whether to include images. While images of dick pics and associated engagements would illustrate our ideas and arguments further, we are mindful of what Louisa Allen notes in “‘It’s Just a Penis’: The Politics of Publishing Photos in Research About Sexuality” (1012) is the politics of publishing photos of bodies, such as men’s bodies. Allen highlights the difficulties and challenges she has encountered when trying to publish sexually explicit images, even when she has received permission and consent to do so. Allen argues that

failure to include photos of the sexual, even in academic journals which centre sex and sexuality, is emblematic of, and contributes to, their designation as risky, controversial and, ultimately, dirty. (1025)

Here, Allen notes the need to move beyond the sexuality-research-as-dirty framework (see also Dowsett 657; Irvine 632). We are strongly sympathetic to this framing but note that social media adds an additional layer of complexity in terms of user privacy (see Moreno et al. 708). As such, while the images we analyze were freely available to the public eye, as well as shared multiple times across various platforms, we have chosen not to republish them nor provide details of user names or timestamps in wake of concerns about the blurred lines of public and private with social media (Fiesler and Proferes 1; Moreno et al. 708; Ravn et al. “The Currency of Images” 1; Robards et al. 1). While this may raise questions about whether comments could be a form of internet trolling (see Binns 547), we note that even trolling comments are important in how they frame, discuss, and represent meanings of dick pics, regardless of their intent.

Below, we focus on “the penis as grotesque/carnavalesque,” “the penis as vulnerable,” and “the penis as erotic,” all of which have been missing from or limited in scholarly considerations of the dick pic.

## Penis as Grotesque/Carnavalesque

The penis as grotesque, and the ways in which this is set up in popular discourse is absent from considerations of the dick pic. As stated previously, the dick pic is often framed as violent or serious pathology, likened to new digital forms of sexual harassment, and digital versions of exhibitionism. However, no attention has been paid to how the dick pic is often set up as grotesque, particularly in the shaming of dick pics in online tumblr websites such as *Bye Felipe* (Shaw 2). Nor has attention been paid to self-denigration of the dick pic, and the way men reclaim notions of the grotesque as fetish and arousing.

We understand the grotesque as a reclamation of desire, in which the framing of the penis as disgusting, small, and unattractive feeds into a broader experience of humiliation and shame that men actively search for, and are aroused by. The grotesque, as understood by Mikhail Bakhtin, is the ability to invoke both pity or empathy and bizarre unfamiliarity in the audience (Clark and Holquist 238). In terms of the body, the grotesque is the exaggeration of what we perceive to be normal, and that such exaggeration invokes feelings of uncomfortability and rejection, but also pity and empathy (Clark and Holquist 238). Carnavalesque refers to Bakhtin’s four literary categories as outlined in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* in 1984:

- *Familiar and free interaction between people* (unlikely people are brought together where freedom of expression is encouraged)
- *Eccentric behavior* (unacceptable behavior is welcomed, and natural behavior is encouraged that may in normal circumstances be deemed inappropriate)
- *Carnivalistic mésalliances* (bringing together of individuals or concepts and ideas that may be normally separated, i.e. young people and old people)

- *Profanation* (strict rules are stripped of honor, focus on the obscene, profane)

While a literary theorist, Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque and the grotesque as defined by Clark and Holquist are relevant when doing a reparative reading of the dick pic (238). To demonstrate this we first highlight what we call "normal" or "standard" responses to dick pics.

General public commentary concerning the dick pic has often resulted to comments denigrating the aesthetic of the penis:

"Dicks look weird and I don't think guys understand that. Dicks aren't attractive all on their own."

"If you send me a dick pic you're going to get a two-word answer in reply and that word will be "had better." They're disgusting and the men who send them unsolicited are thoughtless." (Woods "18 Women Explain Exactly How They Feel About Dick Pics")

Comments that dicks look weird, that they are disgusting, and that no woman would find a penis erotic or beautiful are common. The notion that the penis must be attached to a whole body ties into reproductions of women's desires as being about the whole self, rather than the capacity to enjoy parts, or to sexually objectify men (Cahill 25; Waling 721; Waling et al. "Channing Tatum" 3, Waling et al. "It's Nice to be Appreciated" 4; Waling "Male Strippers" 83). More importantly though, such comments are tied up to expectations on women's capacity for visual arousal, or rather, lack thereof. In women's framing the penis as disgusting, this sets up a discourse in which the penis is always to be seen as disgusting through women's eyes, leaving others who may enjoy dick pics feeling shamed, unnatural, or out-of-place in potentially expressing this desire:

"Ever since I started hearing about how gross they are and how much women supposedly hate them, I've become afraid of coming off like some kind of freak if I admit I enjoy them" (Weiss "Why Dick-Pic Shaming Has Gone Too Far")

Indeed, we can see a reproduction here of the notion that women are not visual creatures, that their ability to be aroused, titillated and sexually engaged is not through the raunch and blunt visual of men's genitalia (Neville 25). This is reaffirmed through positioning the penis as something to which women may not, but more importantly, *should not* desire.

This is perhaps even more apparent when comments about penises are focused on the presence of foreskin, particularly of photos in now closed tumblr blogs such as *Were You Sent A Dick Pic You Didn't Want?:*

"I think your dick is gross and your parents should have had you circumcised"

"i almost vomited LOLLLL Oh gross that just isnt normal"

“Guy called [NAME] from [PLACE] sent me this pic of his tiny cock after i slept with him, worst ride ever!”

“This nasty little dick looks like it’s attached to a VERY old and unattractive man. How about some HOT BOD shots ??? gross just totally gross”

Allan notes in “The Foreskin Aesthetic, or Ugliness Reconsidered” (2018) that contemporary Western understandings of the foreskin, particularly in the US position it as a fundamentally ugly aesthetic. This is achieved through popular discourse about penises such as in American television (i.e. *Sex and the City*) where foreskins are positioned to be abnormal, or unwanted for ideal sexual encounters. Allan contends that such a perspective is unique when contrasted to more global imaginings of the penis across time (560). In the above first two examples, we can see the manner in which this notion of the foreskin as “abnormal” is apparent here, and linked up to the notion that a penis with a foreskin is “nasty,” “gross,” and prone to send someone vomiting.

In the second example above, the linking of a “tiny cock” to poor sexual performance speaks to broader discourses about men, masculinity and sexuality, whereby men are expected to have big penises and have sexual prowess (Richardson 740). The dick pic is also representative of the potential of the more whole body, as in the last example noting that the dick pic (as nasty) is presumed to be part of an unattractive and older man, signaling a preference for youth and conventional attractiveness. Here, the dick pic, or the penis, “is standing in for the man” (Potts 85) whereby a presumed “ugly” penis is thus suggestive of a presumed “ugly” and older man. In these sets of framings, the dick pic is positioned as something that is abhorrent, a monstrosity on the visual senses, more so when it is not circumcised.

However, this same blog demonstrates another side to the dick pic: the dick pic as grotesque and carnivalesque. Here, men actively post dick pics looking to be shamed and humiliated:

“Never knew I could be so gross. Pretty much useless. #humiliation #weird dick #shame #gross #lame #submission.”

“Becky rejected my micro weewee. I begged her to accept me as her beta boi and she told me my penis didn’t meet her standards. #unwanted dick pic #shame #disrespect #gross #micropenis #humiliation.”

“Buy the extra small condoms and it still has room to unroll at the bottom. #shame #gross #humiliation #small dicks #creepy dudes #unwanted dick pic #submission #micropenis #tiny dick #condom”

User Response: Thats... extra pathetic lol  
I doubt youll ever need to use one of  
them >.<

In the first example, the user posts a photo of their penis requesting to be humiliated and shamed. Drawing from BDSM practices of humiliation through the #submission and #humiliation (Carlström 210) this user is thus requesting to be shamed for the grotesqueness of their body, seeking to be aroused through this practice. In the second example, the user posts a photo of themselves noting that they have been rejected due to their small penis size. This rejection is wanted, the user alludes to a Dominant and submissive dynamic through the language “beta boi” and “weewee” and is looking for public recognition of this rejection to further their engagement with being shamed and humiliated for sexual arousal. In the last example, a user posts a photo of themselves wearing an extra-small condom, and notes that the condom is still too big. A second user responds to the photo, stating that no one would ever want to have consensual intercourse with the first user, and thus would not need condoms in the first place. Again, this posting by the first user is a sexual act in wanting the grotesqueness of their body to be recognized, pitied, and shamed, through the carnivalesque.

In these examples, the dick pic invokes both feelings of pity and empathy, through the request to be seen as exaggerated or distorted, and to be shamed for this. Such shame is not unwanted. It is in fact a primary motivation for these men who engage in this practice as it feeds into an experience of sexual arousal and gratification, as an example of the grotesque body. Further, the blog engages with Bakhtin’s carnivalesque premises. First, it encourages users to perform behaviors that would be deemed unacceptable and inappropriate (eccentric). Second, it values the “bringing down to earth” of men who have small penises, perhaps a “bringing down” of masculinity and power (profane). Last, it encourages a freedom of expression and interaction between users of the blog that enable them to indulge their desires of shame/shaming and humiliation/humiliating (familiar and free interaction between people).

## Penis as Vulnerable

The male phallus has historically been set up as hard, aggressive, and violent (Lehman, 5). Indeed, the penis is often seen to be the epitome of masculinity, a symbol of aggression, sexual prowess, dominance, and power. The penis as vulnerable has not necessarily been afforded to men. This is no more apparent than the rapid uptake of Viagra and similar drugs to enable men to have, or prolong, erections for sexual intercourse. Developed initially to treat erectile dysfunction (ED), a condition that increasingly has been criticized for its focus on the biological, rather than the psychological contributors to inability to have or maintain erections (Potts “The Essence of the Hard On” 85 and “The Man with Two Brains” 145; Potts et al. 697; Vares and Braun 315; Grace et al. 295), Viagra is not only used for treating ED, but has increasingly become part of Chemsex, the use of drugs to enhance sexual experience across a spectrum of sexualities and gender orientations (Hammoud et al. 198)

The notion of a man having a “soft” penis is seen as damaging to masculinity (Potts “The Essence of the Hard On” 85 and “The Man with Two Brains” 145; Potts et al. 697; Vares and Braun 315; Grace et al. 295). Hardness is expected of men, and the inability to get hard, often a psychological or stress-related issue, as well as factor of ageing, is believed

to compromise a man's masculinity (Potts 85, Vares and Braun 315). Indeed, the idea that a man could have a penis that is soft, is a vulnerability not afforded to men. The potential for men to be vulnerable or feel the need to express vulnerability, particularly in the case of the soft penis, however, can be seen in the reddit forum *r/Softies: Floppy dicks y'all* ("r/softies").

"r/softies" is described as

a subreddit for those who like, admire and wish to share their enjoyment of the flaccid penis..or 'softie.' All body types, shapes and sizes are welcome here. So come on in and enjoy the flaccid fun! We welcome pictures and videos of soft dicks.

"r/softies" is a body positive and sexually diverse space, enabling generally (though not always) cisgender men to seek reassurance about the look and erotic potential of their penis, particularly that to when it is soft. Softie is thus a term used to describe a "selfie" of a flaccid or tumescent penis. Men post images of their penises in a soft (or sometimes semi-hard) state, either to request private messages for sexual engagement, or to seek feedback on the look and size of their penises:

"My uncut softie, let me know what you think?"

*Comments*

"Cute little peepee."

"It would feel good in my mouth"

"Magnificent"

"Soft but still pretty long"

*Comments*

"Amazing! Love your body and love your long, heavy dick (hearteye emoji)."

"First post , just got in the car from work, cock is a bit tired."

*Comments*

"Very nice"

"Cute little fella"

In these examples (of many), men gain reassurance from the comments of users about the look of their soft penises. Comments are positive, with the reddit rarely if ever having negative comments, which is quite surprising considering the nature in which reddit forums and other social media websites do often spur hateful comments and trolling practices (see MacKinnon & Zuckerman).

This is exemplified in media commentary about "r/softies", where users interviewed by MEL Magazine have highlighted why they engage in the practice:

What I like most about **r/softies** is the numerous sizes of flaccid dicks. A lot of erect pictures are similar, but average erect dicks seem to be an array of

sizes, which I find fascinating. As someone who's always had an issue about my small size when flaccid, I find reassurance in seeing other flaccid dicks similar or smaller than my own—it makes me feel like I fit in rather than feel ashamed about my size. Overall, there's something refreshingly normal about flaccid dicks, almost like you're catching a glimpse of someone in a changing room and comparing their size to yours.

Most guys post on **r/softies** because it's low-risk: If you happened to get criticized about your dick size (which I haven't ever seen), you could just make the argument that the dick was flaccid and that it's actually WAY bigger when erect. As for myself, I didn't plan to post on **r/softies**, but one day I happened to get out of the shower and saw my phone on the table and thought, Why not? It's a confidence boost when people compliment you. Even though they're compliments from complete strangers, it helps someone shy like me feel better about myself.

Softies are my favorite kind of dick pics. Personally, I'm more inclined to share a picture of my soft dick because I like the way it hangs on top of my balls. Other guys like posting softies for a few reasons: First, it's a lot easier than trying to get a good angle with an erect dick. You can just whip it out and take a snap. Second, it's a more natural way to show off what you have and doesn't always have to be sexual. Third, it puts the fantasy in other person's head of wanting to imagine how it will grow. (Smith "Meet the Softies").

These commentaries highlight three key things regarding softies and repositions of the penis as vulnerable. The first, the need for compliments and positive comments highlights the relational nature of dick pics. In "r/softies", it is about eliciting some kind of positive response, and the engagement of others in commenting and providing feedback on posted images.

The second, the need to be able to compare penises to others for reassurance about size, shape and aesthetic. As the advent of pornography and associated sex toys do not necessarily promote diversity in penis shape, size, length, and aesthetic (often large, circumcised, hairless, and long), it is unsurprising that those who engage with "r/softies" do so to seek reassurance about their own penises. Such reassurance is about the normality of their own, the diversity of how one might look, and the range of sizes, shapes and other aesthetics.

The third, is that despite the vulnerability, "r/softies" enable men to counteract claims of being 'too small' through highlighting that the penis is in a soft, rather than hard state. This thus enables men to claim vulnerability that does not jeopardize their claim to masculinity or sexual prowess; it is "about *the potential* of the hard, large penis, rather than *the actual* large, hard penis" (Waling, quoted in Smith). As such, while we might be reading reparatively, it is important to note here that there is still a pull towards needing to be seen as masculine to some degree, even with the potential of a smaller, rather than larger penis. The concept of softies then enables men to maintain a degree of mystique (see Lehman, 5) surrounding the actual size and length of their penis.

## Penis as Erotic

While no longer available due to the tumblr ban on adult content (Romano), Madeline Holden's *Critique my dick pic* was innovative in its engagement with the dick pic (Waling and Pym 84; Paasonen et al. "The dick pic" 1). Holden's blog enabled individuals of all bodies, gender identities, shapes, and sizes to send in photos of dick pics (both penis and clitoris/vulva) and individuals wearing strap-ons for artistic critique and feedback. In this space, Holden provided feedback on the dick pic, and ultimately "grading" the dick pic on its aesthetics. There was, in a sense, a pedagogic value to the Tumblr. Holden's goal, it would seem, was not to get rid of dick pics, but rather to enhance dick pics, to make dick pics great, erotic, and desirable for both the sender and the receiver.

Holden's blog is unique as she provided detailed, artistic, and aesthetic critique of dick pics, focusing on not just the image of the penis itself, but also the lighting, the setting, the movement, the placement of the body, and the overall feeling or mood the photo elicited in the receiver:

### *Excerpt 1*

this is an evocative and creative dick pic, sender, containing careful attention to detail.

let's talk about the lighting first. it's very good! you've positioned your light source so that it is casting a giant, almost ominous shadow over your torso, and it's cleverly drawing attention to the lower half of your face, also present in the frame (a nice touch). black and white is often used as a lazy shortcut to an artistic shot, but here it is used advisedly and in a way that complements the overall tone of the picture.

additionally, there's a generous portion of your non-dick body parts included, careful hand placement and an inviting setting. there's not much not to like, sender. well done!

thank you for submitting to critique my dick pic. your dick pic gets an **A**.

### *Excerpt 2*

this is a dick pic with an opulent setting, sender, but not a lot else going for it.

by far, the advice i find myself repeating the most on this site is "zoom out!", and it applies here, too. this is too close for comfort, and would be drastically improved by the addition of some non-dick body parts, such as your thighs and torso. you have put some thought into the background and included a firm grip, which i appreciate, but the framing is askew and it's pretty much a log.

let's say you lay on your back on this fur rug, and snapped a shot where you were holding yourself in this same fashion, but with the whole mid-section of



your body included. that would be a much better dick pic! keep playing around, sender: you'll get there.

thank you for submitting to critique my dick pic. your dick pic gets a **D+**.

In the first example, Holden provides details as to how well the dick pic has been shot, emphasizing creative and artistic elements that contribute to the photo's appeal. Additionally, she makes note of the inclusion of more of the male body, challenging the convention of dick pics as only ever just being a picture of a penis cut off from the rest of the person. Here, Holden's focus on including more of the body is representative of critiques of pornography of male bodies, with shots focused only on the penis disconnected from the rest of the body (Sørensen 93; Brod 237).[3]

This is contrasted to the second example, whereby Holden requests that the user include more of his body in the shot, highlighting that the image is too close to the penis and therefore not as appealing. Holden refers to this as "a log," implying that the dick pic lacks energy, life, or activity. While she does critique the photo and gives it a D+, she notes that the sender will "get there" and uses language and tone aiming to encourage, rather than shame. In many examples of D and C grade submissions, Holden focuses not only on the quality of the photo, but whether it elicits any kind of intimacy, welcomes individuals in, or stirs arousal. She then advises submitters to view her gallery of A submissions to effectively learn how to take a more appealing dick pic.

*Critique my dick pic* thus evokes a demand for intimacy, asking users to ensure that the images are more than just a picture of their penis, strap-on, or in some cases, clitoris, that such images denote fantasy, eroticism, and appeal. Further, Holden reminds the senders that such images should be imagining their audience, and that senders need to take more careful consideration as to the kinds of emotions they wish to stir in the receiver:

Sender: I thought the 3D angle would look more real, possibly turning girls on easier?

Holden: it's not especially good, sender, no.

i'm not entirely sure what you mean by the "3D angle", but a straight-down shot of your dick is not the most effective angle for "turning girls on". of course i can't speak for all girls, but your dick pic would be more erotic if it was less narrowly focused on your dick itself and included more of the rest of your body, and if you'd put a bit more thought into the lighting and setting. in short, if you made it look any different to the numerous mundane dick pics thrust at women every day it might be more appealing. keep trying, though, sender!

thank you for submitting to critique my dick pic. your dick pic gets a **D+**.

In the above, Holden again emphasizes the need to include more of the body in order to elicit a more favorable response, drawing upon conventional discourses about women's

sexuality that they need to be able to look beyond the penis in order to be aroused, rather than seeing the body itself as a valid and enticing form of attraction (see Waling et al. “Channing Tatum” 4). Effort, in terms of lighting and setting are again emphasized, highlighting the performative nature of the taking of dick pics. Indeed, while Holden’s blog emphasizes body inclusivity and diverse representation, she nevertheless encourages senders to look beyond the taking of a simple photo that could be mistaken as just one of many. The language of “mundane” suggests that these are the common photos that women receive, but as Holden points out, are not what they want. Here, Holden suggests that photos for women require difference, effort, thought and care, not suggesting that women do not like dick pics, but rather, women are looking for more than a casual photo taken at a moment’s notice. In this way, Holden is attempting to support men in highlighting that good dick pics can, and do, incite arousal, and can be erotic, if they achieve a particular level of creativity and effort. She privileges the assumed desires of women here (see Neville 25; Waling et al. “Channing Tatum” 4), directing the men on how to be better, rather than women needing to appease men.

Further, Holden emphasizes the positive and inclusive nature of her blog, refusing to engage in body-shaming of those who do not have idealized, muscular bodies:

this sender expressed to me some insecurities about his body & critique my dick pic has a lot of new followers, so it might be worth reiterating my policy about body shaming in this post.

my policy about body shaming: i don’t do it. ever.

this is a pretty good dick pic, sender. pretty good indeed. i like the fact that you’ve included a generous swath of your body, and you’ve made good use of your hand here, curled suggestively & tentatively near your dick.

the downsides are that your pose is a bit on the rigid/tense side, and you haven’t really done a lot to make this dick pic “pop”. i feel like a hotter dick pic is inside you, sender—let it out.

thank you for submitting to critique my dick pic. your dick pic gets a **B+**.

Similar to “r/softies”, Holden creates a space that enables individuals to share photos and get ratings as a kind therapeutic space. While social media has been under intense scrutiny for its impact on body image and eating disorders (see Perloff 363; Griffiths et al. 150), others have noted that some men’s engagement with these platforms can have positive, rather than detrimental effects (see Caruso and Roberts 628). Indeed, Holden’s blog enables individuals to seek affirmation in a way that is helpful, encouraging, and supportive, achieved through acknowledging anxieties about dick pics and sharing intimate photos, emphasizing their erotic potential.

## Discussion & Conclusion

Over the course of this article, we have sought to imagine another way of looking at the dick pic, another way of reading the dick pic, a reading that is not dependent upon paranoid readings marked by a desire to pathologize and criminalize not only the picture, but the sender. In much of the literature, we contend, there is seemingly an a priori understanding of what the dick pic does, what it means, and why it is sent (especially in the context of unsolicited dick pics). We note three key readings, including the penis as grotesque/carnavalesque, the penis as vulnerable, and the penis as erotic. These readings suggest that there is nuance to the dick pic beyond pathological assumptions of narcissism, and concerns about sexual violence that currently dominate the literature. This is not to suggest that those readings are invalid nor to be dismissive of the experiences of harm. Rather, we argue that a broader understanding of the dick pic is needed, not just in terms of who sends it, but also in how it exists and is read, who receives it, and how it is received. The dick pic, thus, we contend, reveals a great deal.

In his book, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (2007), Peter Lehman argues that “the silence surrounding the sexual representation of the male body is itself totally in the service of traditional patriarchy” (5) and thus, he contends, “patriarchy benefits from and may even be partly contingent on perpetuating the mystique of the penis-phallus” (5). If we take this as a philosophical starting point, what is most offensive, then, perhaps, about the dick pic is that it destroys the “mystique of the penis-phallus,” and instead puts the penis-phallus on full display, flaws and all. The phallus maintains its power because it is a secret, as Barbara DeGenevieve noted, “to unveil the penis is to unveil the phallus is to unveil the social construction of masculinity. And *that* is the real taboo” (4; Lehman 5). Accordingly, Lehman argues that,

only after thus centering the male body will it be possible to decenter it, for it is precisely when the penis-phallus is hidden from view in patriarchy that it is most centered. There is no way that we can move beyond the impasse surrounding the male body by simply ignoring it, since that is what patriarchy wants us to do and has, in fact, been quite successful in bringing about. (5-6)

We recognize wholeheartedly that Lehman’s project, which is centered on the male body in film, is different from ours, but we cannot help but ask if these arguments might not hold some value to the study of the dick pic. The dick pic reveals everything and undercuts the “mystique of the penis-phallus,” by centering it in the visual imaginary.

As much as these readings of the dick pic as grotesque/carnavalesque, as vulnerable, and as erotic reveal the “mystique of the penis-phallus,” it also reveals the fragility of the phallus. The dick pic does not hide the ideal, but rather it reveals the real thing in varying forms. As much as the photographer may hope to capture the ideal dick pic, it is a very real dick that is at the center of the photograph, whether it is intended to be desired (see Paasonen et al. “The dick pic”), reassured, or humiliated. The viewer is presented with an image of the penis that reveals its nuance, and in so doing, the dick pic reveals what should

not be revealed: the power of the phallus. The phallus is imaginary, the dick pic is real and makes the phallic image all too real. In the dick pic one can see the flaws that make it real.

What if, we might ask, what most offends about the dick pic is that it reveals what is at the heart of the patriarchal imagination? The phallus. But it reveals it in such a way that the slippage between the phallus and the penis is materialized. Much critical labor has been spent distinguishing between the two, but the dick pic, perhaps more than others, seeks to represent the phallus only to show the all-too-real penis. The dick pic, like the phallus, shows off the penis without shame, without a veil. The dick pic shows a diversity of penises. A penis with a foreskin, for instance, may well reveal what is not expected in cultures where circumcision is normative. The foreskin is framed as ugly and abnormal; however, for others, the circumcised penis may appear damaged, mutilated, etc. For example, the dick pic can reveal the circumcision scars, two-toned pigmentation, as well as other “flaws” (see Allan “Circumcision scars” 135). The senders of these photographs try to find the ideal in their penis, but each one shows its viewer/recipient the nuance of the penis. No one penis is like another. This becomes more evident the more one sees a variety of dick pics across the three blogs.

In many ways, then, we might perhaps argue that the senders of these photographs are trying to contend with what happens when the penis is no longer required or expected to be “hidden from view” (Lehman 5). Just as patriarchy is under increasing critique, so too is the “mystique of the phallus.” It might be tempting to suggest that the dick pic is a response to the “crisis of masculinity,” (see Edwards 7) but such a claim is ahistorical given that crisis is not new. What is new, however, is a sustained analysis and critique of patriarchy, which has, for so long, benefited from the imagined ideal of the phallus representing the real penis. If patriarchy is being undressed, as it were, so too is the penis, which for so long remained hidden away, now has become normatively displayed. Individuals are being invited to show off their penises in a variety of diverse ways that do not necessarily adhere to expectations of phallic imagery, but rather, challenge and transgress them. From asking to be humiliated for size, look and stature (grotesque/carnavalesque), to seeking positive reassurance and expressing concerns about size and shape in soft form (vulnerable), to adhering to the critiques and expectations of female desires (erotic), these all note a marked shift away from idealized phallic imaginary (and also the pornographic imaginary, as a site of patriarchal desire). A reparative reading of the dick pic then, demonstrates that it cannot be understood solely as an extension of patriarchal power or pathological impulse.

Research on the dick pic needs to move beyond the pathological and legalistic tone that has been so central to research to date, and much of this research has been caught up in a heteronormative discourse. Accordingly, research should recognize the harms done by/with these images (Vitis and Gilmore 336) while also acknowledging that dick pics do not exist as a singular and totalizing sign that has only one meaning (see Waling and Pym 84; Paasonen et al. “The dick pic” 1). Instead, we argue that signs are polysemous (Barthes 38). The questions we are interested in exploring, and hope that future scholars will consider, is how the dick pic exists, how it is used, what it means symbolically and aesthetically, and the affective life of the dick pic. We are, thus, arguing against the compulsion to imagine that the dick pic is always bad or always problematic; indeed, we would argue that the dick pic is part of sexuality in the digital age (Waling and Pym 84; Paasonen et al. “The dick pic” 1).

[1] Heteronormativity “refers to the belief that there is a distinct separation of genders with ‘natural roles’ in life and daily conduct, including the notion that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation” (Waling and Roffee 306).

[2] In December 2018, Tumblr decided to ban all adult content, specifically anything that could be regarded as sexualized or pornographic (Romano “Tumblr is Banning Adult Content”). Blogs such as *Were You Sent A Dick Pic You Didn't Want* and *Critique my dick pic* are no longer available for viewing, but the authors have this data set archived.

[3] Anecdotally, while scholars have argued that pornography disconnects the penis from the male body deliberately in an attempt to reaffirm the subjectification and harmful treatment of women in pornography, conversations with pornography film-makers have noted that often times disconnected shots are the result of needing to use body doubles when a male actor may be having issues with sexual performance. This, of course, relates back to what many scholars have noted is the pressure to perform sexually, always be hard, ready, and able to last for long periods of time (Potts “The Essence of the Hard On” 85 and “The Man with Two Brains” 145; Potts et al. 697; Vares and Braun 315; Grace et al. 295).

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