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Digital media and the unsolicited dick pic – constructions of masculinity and femininity among Swedish teens

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of sexting and dissemination of explicit sexual images (ESI) among teenagers has risen with mobile technology. Social media platforms amplify these practices, perpetuating problematic usage patterns. This study explores the understanding of how young people perceive the senders and receivers of unsolicited dick pics, focusing on gender construction. Ten semi-structured group interviews with cisgendered girls and boys aged 12–16 were conducted and analysed thematically. The findings show that boys are the primary senders of dick pics, while girls are primarily on the receiving end, with boys and girls interpreting unsolicited dick pics differently. Girls more often viewed such behaviour as romantic, while only boys recognized it as harassment. This disparity emphasizes the need for internet safety education and interventions to challenge mainstream constructions of gender norms. By addressing these issues, educators and caregivers can better support adolescents in navigating the complexities of online interactions and promoting healthy relationships.

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Adolescents; explicit sexual images; gender norms; sexting; sexual solicitation; social media

Introduction

Sexting and the dissemination of explicit sexual images (ESI) through mobile technology have become a common practice in teen peer culture in the past decade. While there is no consensus regarding the definition of sexting, it is usually considered to encompass both ESI and text-based messages through digital media. Another key aspect is that it normally includes both sending and receiving sexts (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). The Criminal Justice and Courts Act in the U.S (The National Archives, 2015) defines ESI as 'photographs or films which show people engaged in sexual activity, or depicted in a sexual way, or with their genitals exposed, where what is shown would not usually be seen in public'. Similar writings have been incorporated into legislation in other countries, including Sweden (Swedish Penal Code [Brottsbalken], 2017). The production, dissemination, and consumption of ESI are facilitated by digital media and particularly platforms like Snapchat, Frankly, and Wickr where images are shown under a limited amount of time and then disappears (Charteris et al., 2018). Consensual sexting, including the practice of sending ESI, may be a part of a romantic or sexual relationship (Cooper et al., 2016; Lee & Crofts, 2015; McGeeney & Hanson, 2017). However, it is still regarded as a risk factor for sextortion (also called revenge pornography) and adverse mental health effects (Gassó et al., 2019; Mori et al., 2019; Sciacca et al., 2024). In a review of the literature, Gassó et al. (2019) found that the association between sexting and poor mental health, depression,

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and anxiety symptoms is mediated by coercion, victimization, and age. Even within a romantic or sexual relationship, non-consensual sexting can occur and may indicate other types of violence within the relationship (Cooper et al., 2016). Accordingly, receiving non-consensual ESI, and in particular so-called 'dick pics' (an image of the erect male sexual organ), may be harmful for mental health. Gillander Gådin et al. (2024), has shown that among 15-year-olds in Sweden, 52% of girls and 6% of boys have received an unsolicited dick pic in the last 6 months and that it is associated with detrimental mental health outcomes.

Entitlement has been found to contribute to a variety of forms of abuse and harassment against women (Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018). Addressing the adult population, Hayes and Dragiewicz (2018) argues that the motives behind men's sending of unsolicited dick pics may be sexual and/or aggrieved entitlement. Sexual entitlement refers to the socially constructed belief that men are entitled to sex (Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018). Kimmel (2013) describes aggrieved entitlement as the anger men feel when they are deprived of patriarchal privileges they think they deserve or when they perceive their cultural superiority is under threat. In line with this, Sills et al. (2016) argue that social media enables a rape culture to serve as a constant backdrop to young people's digital lives. Entitlement then serves as a driving force that perpetuates harmful behaviours, including the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics. This sense of entitlement can lead some young men to believe they have the right to assert their dominance or express their sexuality without considering the consent or feelings of the recipients. Mandau (2020) has in fact shown in a qualitative study that girls and young women 17–20 years old experienced unsolicited dick pics as intrusive, and that they perceived these images as misguided attempts at flirting. In contrast, boys and young men aged 17–20 perceived the sending of dick pics as a way of showing off, complimenting, hooking-up with, or getting nude pictures from girls and young women (Mandau, 2020).

Young people 12–16 years of age, represent a more vulnerable group, due to their limited ability of self-regulation and their high susceptibility to peer pressure (McCrae et al., 2017; Riehm et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the use of social media is a central part of many young people's lives, and problematic social media use, e.g. continued usage despite evidence of harm, is not uncommon (Sohn et al., 2019). Charteris et al. (2018) point out how social media offer young people opportunities to harness teenage discourses of social positioning. This may explain continuous usage despite harm, as social positioning is essential in most young people's lives. We draw on the work of Connell (1987) and Paechter (2007, 2018) to argue that the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics serves as a tool for engaging in discursive practices that position the sender within power relations, and reinforce hegemonic masculinity. In most Western societies, the ideal hegemonic masculinity is broadly considered heterosexual, aggressive and assertive, courageous, and almost invulnerable to threats and problems, an ideal that positions men as active subjects (Waling & Pym, 2019). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that this is a prescribed and idealized set of norms, rather than an accurate reflection of men's lived realities. Nevertheless, they claim that hegemonic masculinity is a normative standard to which men can aspire and against and to which individual men can assess themselves and other men. Connell (1987) suggests that gender is relational and that gender relations are constructed in active social practices. These practices are inevitably subject to change over time, and the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics is a relatively new phenomenon facilitated by modern digital technology. Paechter (2007, p. 18) argues that as some masculinities are more powerfully positioned than others, performing a certain kind of masculinity immediately places a person in a power relationship '. . . in which many other things are implied, in terms of that person's potential to operate in the world in particular ways.'. Francis and Paechter (2015, p. 782) later develop this thought stating that '. . . a range of productions of masculinity and femininity can be present in any particular context [. . .], and that these are connected by complex and mobile relationships of power and resistance.' Contrary to Connell (1987) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) who claim that femininity can never be hegemonic, Paechter (2018) argues that hegemonic femininities parallel hegemonic masculinities in being constructed *in relation to other femininities*, not, as with emphasized femininity (see Connell, 1987), as a subservient Other to a particular form of hegemonic

masculinity. Nevertheless, Paechter (2018) also argues that hegemonic femininities is working with hegemonic masculinities to preserve a still patriarchal and binary gender order as a group consisting of girls/women with a hegemonic femininity still does not have power over hegemonic boys/men.

We argue that developing strategies to prevent the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics are of uttermost concern, and that it is important to understand these practices from young people's perspectives to design meaningful interventions. A Canadian study of sexting (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019) highlights in their findings that the sending and receiving of dick pics in 13–19-year-olds is a part of sexting behaviour. However, the *unsolicited* dick pic must be considered sexting without consent, and to the best of our knowledge, no previous studies specifically focus on the phenomenon of the unsolicited dick pic from the perspectives of 12–16-year-olds. The aim of the current study was to gain understanding of young people's perspectives regarding the senders and receivers of unsolicited dick pics, and to gain a deeper understanding of what the unsolicited dick pics is all about.

Method

Design and participants

To understand how young people construct the behaviour of sending unsolicited dick pics and what it means to be a receiver of such images, we set out to interview young people 12–16 years old. We tried to untangle how young boys and girls themselves understand the phenomenon of the unsolicited dick pic, in terms of how they construct the senders and receivers of such images. Thus, a qualitative method with an explorative and descriptive approach fits well. This study is part of a larger research project addressing threats and harassment on social media among young people. We conducted ten group interviews (3–7 participants each) with adolescent girls and boys in 2019. There were two male and two female groups of 12–14-year-olds, and four male and two female groups of 15–16-year-olds, with a total of 50 participants (girls $n = 21$, boys $n = 29$). Participants represented a mix of Swedish and foreign extraction, although participants were predominantly Swedish. No participants openly claimed a gender identity other than cisgender. Only one participant openly declared a bisexual orientation, but to ensure confidentiality we have not made a point of this in the analysis. This means that the young people participating in the group interviews represent a mainly heterosexual perspective. Table 1 shows the number of participants in each group.

Procedure

An invitation letter was sent to all registered 12–16-year-olds at two Youth Centers (YC) in a mid-sized municipality in the northern part of Sweden. Attached to the invitation was an information letter addressed to young people, and another one addressed to legal guardians. The manager of the YC also talked to visitors during opening hours and informed them about the study. However, in accordance with our instructions, the managers did not try to persuade anyone to participate in an interview if they did not want to. To sign up for participation in the interview, legal guardians of youth under the age of 15 were asked to sign a written consent document, which participants brought to the YC manager who administered all consent forms. In a few cases, the signed document was handed over directly to the interviewers before starting the interview. The YC manager also established the groups according to our instructions regarding gender and age. As the managers knew the participants quite well, they also took into consideration dynamics among participants to ensure that participants would feel as safe as possible.

We were interested in the dominant discourses to which the participants related regarding hate and threats on social media. Through group discussions and interactions, group interviews have the potential to generate rich data and to capture cultural norms and shared experiences in a social

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Participants Ages 12–14		Age ≥15	
Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Group 1 $n = 3$ Participants cited: Sophia Julia	Group 3 $n = 6$ Participants cited: Mike	Group 5 $n = 6$ Participants cited: Amanda Sarah	Group 7 $n = 3$ Participants cited: John
Group 2 $n = 6$ Participants cited: Keira	Group 4 $n = 7$ Participants cited: Sean Gabriel	Group 6 $n = 6$ Participants cited: Caroline	Group 8 $n = 4$ Participants cited: Jacob Joey Group 9 $n = 4$ Participants cited: Mark Group 10 $n = 4$
Total: 9	Total: 13	Total: 12	Total: 15

context (Kitzinger, 1994). The interviews took place at the YC in a separate room to ensure confidentiality, and that there be no disturbances during the interviews.

One male interviewer (36 years old) with extensive experience in bullying prevention in schools, interviewed four of the groups of boys. One female interviewer, 59 years old (second author), interviewed two of the groups of boys. A third interviewer, female, 45 years old (first author), conducted all interviews with girls. All three interviewers were experienced in interviewing groups of young people with focus on bullying and sexual harassment offline. Both authors have several years of research experience regarding bullying and sexual harassment, and associations to poor mental health. In the interviews, we addressed the general issue of what is happening on social media (see Appendix 1). In several interviews, the dissemination of explicit sexual images (ESI), and in particular dick pics, came up spontaneously as a response to this more general question. In groups where it did not come up spontaneously, we used a prompt. The prompt was an arranged picture of a carrot between a pair of legs to represent a picture of a dick pic. This image was previously created by senior high-school girls participating in a photovoice research project (Brännström et al., 2020) addressing gendered violence in rural Sweden. This prompt worked very well to show participants that we, the adult interviewers, knew about the issue. The interviews lasted 45–60 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

For the purpose of this paper, we extracted data related to the dissemination of dick pics, as the interviews as a whole addressed a wider scope of hate, threats, and harassment on social media. Many of the informants spoke of their own experiences, or about what they witnessed or heard about other people's experiences. In the analysis, we have not emphasized whether they themselves disseminated or received unsolicited dick pics. We focus on how the informants understand the action of disseminating unsolicited dick pics, and how they construct the sender and the receiver of such images.

The data was analysed with an inductive approach using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data, according to Braun et al. (2015). The inductive approach involves theory-free exploration of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and generates themes that are closely linked to the data without any theoretical constraint. Both authors initially read through the extracted data several times for familiarity. In a second step, the first author separated data by gender, and marked and coded phrases and sentences. In a third step, looking for patterns, sub-themes were created of the codes by the first author. As a fourth step, both authors reviewed the sub-themes to make sure that they represented data accurately. After thorough discussions, we made some

adjustments until consensus was achieved. Finally, one main theme was created to reflect our understanding of the phenomena of the unsolicited dick pic among young people.

Terminology

Explicit Sexual Images (ESI) usually entails *nudes*, referring to images of both the naked male and female body, while *dick pics* denotes pictures of the erect male sexual organ. In contemporary Swedish, it is not uncommon to use English language words or even whole sentences for a range of different phenomena. In the context of social and digital media, this practice is very common among the young generation. Our interviewees, although Swedish speaking, used the English language terminology for ESI, but seemed to make the distinction that the term *nudes* was used to represent primarily images of the naked female body. Hence, in the following, the English language term *nudes* represents primarily the naked female body. Unsolicited or non-consensual images of the erect male sexual organ was denoted with the English language term *random dick pics*.

Ethical considerations

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority approved the study (Dnr: 2019–03172). Parental written consent was obtained for participants <15 years. Early in the recruitment process, we got feedback that many parents considered the research project very important, and that some parents told their son or daughter to participate in the interviews. To ensure assent and that the young person was there voluntarily, and not because of a parent, the interviewer asked all participants explicitly if they were present of their free will, and not because a parent sent them.

Starting the interviews, we once more informed the participants of the aim of the study, as well as that everything said in the interviews was confidential, and that neither their parents, nor teachers or staff at the YC, would receive information about what any individual or individual group discussed. We also emphasized that participants could withdraw from the interview at any time without explanation. During the interviews, we offered the participants a snack, including beverages. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used when reporting findings.

Findings

While social media in general was something these young people related to daily, dick pics specifically were commonly mouthed about among peers. Both boys and girls agreed that receiving and sending explicit sexual images was okay if both parties wished to do so, and they viewed the consensual exchange of explicit sexual images as part of a romantic or sexual relationship. Being a sender or a receiver of *non*-consensual dick pics was, however, understood in a range of different ways. Girls expressed that 'random', i.e. *non*-consensual dick pics, were always unwelcome, and described receiving dick pics from someone to whom they had never spoken as bewildering.

As shown in Table 2, the analysis rendered one theme: *Setting the stage of an unequal gendered social position*. The construction of the sending boy showed six sub-themes (Table 2), and the construction of the receiving girl showed two sub-themes.

The construction of the sending boy

Both girls and boys offered a diverse and quite complex understanding of the sending boy, as they considered several motives as explanations for why boys would send unsolicited dick pics. In the data, several different understandings appeared: 'the guy wanting recognition', 'the sleazy guy', and 'the horny guy', were identified by both boys and girls. The understanding of the sending boy as 'the immature guy' and 'the sick guy' was evident only among the girls, while only boys discussed the understanding of the sending boy as 'the harassing guy'.

Table 2. Theme and sub-themes generated in the analysis.

Theme						
Setting the Stage of an Unequal Gendered Social Position						
Sub-themes						
	Constructed by both boys and girls			Constructed by boys only	Constructed by girls only	
The sending boy	The Guy Wanting Recognition	The Sleazy Guy	The Horny Guy	The Harassing Guy	The Immature Guy	The Sick Guy
The receiving girl	The Ordinary Everyday Girl			The Easy Target		

The guy wanting recognition

Seeking recognition of his potential value as a sex partner, boys would initiate a (text) conversation negotiating consent to send a dick pic. The issue of consent appears to be a dodgy one in the interviews, where for boys, the line between consent and non-consent was sometimes blurred. While boys sometimes explicitly asked before sending a dick pic, boys told us that they also solicited consent while simultaneously soliciting nudes from girls. They did so by using dick pics to negotiate, with an 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours' logic. When boys succeeded in this endeavour, they felt they had gained recognition for their mating value, which they strived for. This was further offered as an explanation of why some boys would send dick pics found on the Internet:

I: But how do guys who send this [dick pic] think? It's not always, as I've come to understand, that they send one of their own, but they find it online and then they send it. Or?

Mike: 'Cause they think that bigger is better. Yes, but it is . . . [laughter bursts out] I get it, it's actually very funny, I think so too. But it is often that . . . [more laughter]

I: Okay, so they find something online that is like bigger.

Mike: And then they send that. And then maybe they think that 'this girl's gonna like me more now. Maybe she'll send something back because it's bigger than they usually are.'

Girls supported the view that boys' need for recognition was one reason why they send dick pics and agreed that when a boy sends a dick pic, it is often to solicit nudes in return. Girls also understood the need for recognition as boys' desire to prove or advertise something. "Look what you'll be missing if you don't go out with me," was how Keira verbalized her understanding of a boy's rationale for sending dick pics. Girls also discussed how some boys seemed to be obsessed with the male sexual organ, and boys' assumption that girls would be as interested in it as they are. Sophia told us about a friend of hers:

> Then . . . [giggles] . . . he wrote to her and asked what she liked about guys. She wrote that she didn't know. Then he wrote, 'Is it down there, that it should be long?' It's like, I wonder, who'd write such a thing?

These kinds of dirty comments or dirty talk were sometimes associated with the boy negotiating consent to send a dick pic, but also preceded or accompanied the dick pic when it came to another type of sender, 'the sleazy guy', described below.

The sleazy guy

Girls and boys both agreed that some boys send dick pics to all the girls. The boys concluded this based on information they had gotten from friends who were girls and claimed that often a certain kind of sleazy guy sends dick pics to almost all the girls. However, neither girls nor boys elaborated on the deeper motives behind the sleazy guy's actions, as if labelling him 'sleazy' would explain why he sends dick pics to 'all the girls'. This seems to suggest that the sleazy guy has no personal interest in any one girl, in contrast to a third type of sender, 'the horny guy'.

The horny guy

When it came to sexual desire as an incentive for boys to send dick pics, a complex understanding appeared in these interviews. Some boys believed that boys might send unsolicited dick pics because of sexual desire:

Jacob: The guy feels a bit horny, so he just goes for it directly. Maybe he hasn't even talked to the person for weeks and suddenly there it is.

Joey: They might not even know each other.

Jacob: Exactly. They've never met.

I: Just like, here's a picture of . . .

Jacob: It's almost like a kind of pick-up line.

I: Yes. Is that what one is hoping for when one is sending?

Joey: I'd guess so.

Jacob: That it will turn the girl on.

Girls agreed that the dick pics commonly were about boys wanting to have sex:

I: But when it is unsolicited then, like totally random on Snapchat for example, what is the message behind it do you think, what do they want?

Keira: Mmm. . .to get laid. They get laid.

Girls seemed to consider sexual interest, in addition to the boys wanting recognition, to be the most obvious reason why boys would be sending dick pics. They thought that boys always wanted something sexual in return, or that they wanted recognition for their value as a sex partner. However,

boys had an additional understanding of the motives behind sending dick pics, which was to harass girls, a motive elaborated on below.

The harassing guy

Boys claimed that one incentive of sending dick pics to girls was to 'mess with them'. Boys expressed the view that non-consensual dissemination of dick pics was often a means for boys in groups to harass girls, rather than express romantic or sexual interest. John explained:

> I think it is, for the most part, that you like want to be cool or something or to mess with someone, it's a group of guys. I don't really think that anybody do it for sexual gain, that they send, yeah, they send a picture of their penis to their girlfriend 'cause [. . .] they're turned on, 'cause they feel like doing it. More like 'cause it is like 'Oh, look, haha, I did it, I sent a dick pic to this girl!'

In contrast, the girls interpreted the boys' motives for sending random dick pics in various ways, but not as a means of harassment, or that they were being messed with. Rather, "Maybe they just think it's funny," as Sophia put it. While girls agreed that a boy might send random dick pics out of sexual interest (getting laid), or need for recognition, they seemed to be oblivious to the possibility that it is something boys would do (in groups) to mess with or harass them. Girls seem to mistake a boy harassing them for 'the horny guy,' or the guy needing recognition for his value as a sex partner, or for a boy that is immature as described below.

The immature guy

A less prevalent understanding in these interviews was that of the sender of random dick pics as 'the immature guy'. This sub-theme only appears in the girls' discussions of dick pic senders, as boys did not understand the sending boy as immature. Girls assumed that this sender has a romantic or perhaps sexual interest in the receiving girl but does not know how to express his interest. Julia explains: 'It could be that if a guy sends it to a girl, it's because maybe actually he likes her, but he doesn't know how to behave.' Other girls also shared the view that the boy does it because he likes the girl, and that is when the dick pics, or offerings of dick pics, start coming. Amanda shared that, right before the interview, a friend of hers got a dick pic, and that this girl interpreted it as romantic interest: 'It's so much of that stuff [unsolicited dick pics] going on if you ask me. As recently as today, just like ten minutes ago, there was this girl that thought that there was a person that was kinda into her.'

The sick guy

Perceiving the sending boy as 'sick' was a way for younger girls who received a random dick pic for the first time to try to understand why they the boy had sent it to her. Sarah remembers what she was thinking the first time it happened to her: 'Why is he sending this to me?'. Then, she talked it over with her friends, and told them 'What the f**k, is he sick? Yes, maybe he is.'.

The construction of the receiving girl

The understanding of the receiving girl was a less complex matter than the understanding of the sending boy, in the sense that only two subthemes emerged. However, 'the easy target' and 'the ordinary, everyday girl' are two subthemes representing a complex situation for girls in terms of navigating the consequences of being a receiver of dick pics.

The easy target

Both boys and girls agreed that you cannot send a random dick pic to your best friend (whether a boy or a girl) – that was out of the question. According to boys, one should also not send an

unsolicited dick pic to somebody they have a crush on or are in love with. On the other hand, for some boys, it was not obviously forbidden to send a dick pic to a near-stranger. Interestingly, some boys thought it was a good idea to send random dick pics to someone they did not know very well, since in those cases, it was easier to ensure anonymity and avoid embarrassment. Hence, sometimes, sending a dick pic was the overriding priority, and the recipient was of secondary importance.

So, when a boy feels up to sending a dick pic, the idea of 'the easy target' emerges. One boy explained: 'It's often that it's to those who are a bit more exposed in general too. Those who, yeah. But it is for derogatory purposes or what one may call it.' Girls and bisexual boys who were already targets of other types of harassment became easy targets for random dick pics, according to boys. The random dick pics may also become a vicious circle in themselves, if word got out that a girl was receiving them as they then are seen as easy targets. When we asked boys if girls tell people that they are receiving random dick pics, Mark said:

> It is not something that is fun to be open about all the time, unless you've been taught that you should be proud of it. 'Cause it's not that fun if you talk to your friends about it and then a guy overhears … Sorry, but if a guy overhears it, that's not fun at all, if he overhears it, you might … then he might get the idea that that's how you're supposed to …

This shows that boys understand girls' exposedness in this regard, but they also shared with us the view that there really is 'that kind of girl' that is an easy target and that she is eligible for random dick pics if she becomes known for sending nudes:

Sean: I know it has happened, it was like that in our former class, it was at least one guy who found that kind of girl on Snapchat or something.

Gabriel: Walter.

Sean: Yeah, and …

Gabriel: Then they were like talking to her [on social media] and stuff …

Sean: And then she sent a picture of her private parts.

I: To him?

Sean: Yes.

I: Like, in an exchange, he had sent first?

Gabriel: Yeah, 'cause apparently, she wanted that stuff.

Here, there seems to be an underlying assumption that if a girl sends nudes to one boy and receives a dick pic in return, it is okay for others to send dick pics as well. Girls, on the other hand, did not endorse this view, and considered random dick pics as always unwelcome.

While acknowledging that girls do solicit for dick pics by sending nudes, it was rare compared to the opposite situation, and never discussed in terms of 'some girls do it to all the boys,' as was the case with 'sleazy' boys, who send dick pics to 'everybody'. Furthermore, girls who were asked whether a girl would send a nude image of herself, before even speaking to a boy, found the question a bit absurd:

I: I'm thinking unsolicited. That is, without guys asking for it but one does it [sends nudes] just like that?

Julia: It is usually that you chat, chat and then you do it or start sending [nudes].

Sophia: From the start without chatting first? What is that about?

In general, the girls did not describe themselves as easy targets, and did not seem to identify with 'that kind of girl' at all; this was a construction made by the boys. However, that did not mean that girls could get away from the dick pics.

The ordinary everyday girl

As discussed, girls did not identify with the construction of 'the easy target'. Rather, they identified with being an ordinary, everyday girl, which still meant receiving unsolicited dick pics. The girls learned to deal with these issues at an early age, and it started when they were about 11–12 years old, upon getting access to social media. Caroline explained:

> When you're quite young, and you register for Snapchat you don't know what to expect. You just open Snapchat and like, 'yeah, let's find some new friends' and you just get a dick pic and get traumatized for life.

When we asked girls how they reacted the first time they received a random dick pic, the picture was clear: 'disgusted,' 'nauseated', 'scared', 'shocked.' 'So shocked I wanted to throw up,' and 'I wanted to get rid of it. First thing was to block,' were some responses. Boys mirrored this in their understanding of how girls reacted upon receiving a random dick pic, and used words like 'disgusted,' 'a bit scary,' 'really upsetting,' but also 'surprised.' However, several girls described that, over time, they had learnt to laugh about it. Random dick pics, and being solicited for nudes, were very common narratives in the interviews with girls. One girl estimated that '99%' of 15-year-old girls with access to social media have received random dick pics at some point. A random dick pic was quite commonly accompanied by different 'dirty' comments. Many of the girls had received dick pics on several occasions, and some girls received several pictures a day: 'It's not even a thing, no one even reacts anymore, at least not among us. [. . .] Now we're just like "Yeah? You too?" [laughter]'. In contrast, the boys never expressed that they were aware of girls' apparently blasé attitude towards receiving unsolicited dick pics, as they surmised that girls always had a reaction of some sort, whether surprise, titillation, disgust, or even fear.

In romantic relationships, trust was negotiated through the sending of explicit sexual images. Girls needed to trust that their boyfriend would not forward nude images to others. However, the girls in our study were very aware of the risks of further dissemination when sending nudes to someone, even to a boyfriend. They spoke about what may happen if a nude got out there, and one obvious risk was to be seen as 'the easy target,' which would entail getting random dick pics from other boys. They also risked becoming the target of hate from other girls. One girl said: 'Then it may come out and like "This is what this person looks like, what can we do with this? How can we work this? How can we comment on this?"'. Hence, 'the everyday girl' could easily transform into 'the easy target' if the word got out that she had sent

nudes to someone. Hence, for girls, getting the 'the easy target' label became a risk for further exposure and victimization.

To conclude, girls as receivers were constructed as either the 'the easy target' or as an ordinary, everyday girl. 'the easy target' was eligible for receiving random dick pics if she became known as 'liking that stuff,' and/or reciprocated with nude images, or if the word got out that other boys were sending dick pics to her. The ordinary, everyday girl was constructed as just an ordinary, everyday girl who nevertheless received random dick pics, but because of all kinds of reasons. Being a girl meant having to manage reactions to unsolicited dick pics, i.e. learning to laugh about them and minimize their significance. This reveals the cognitive coping strategies that girls must develop to deal with a perhaps constant stream of dick pics. It also means that girls must navigate an intricate set of rules to avoid becoming 'the easy target', if they were not careful about their own dissemination of explicit sexual images, or nudes. It also meant keeping quiet about receiving dick pics, or risk receiving more.

Boys, in turn, were constructed in more various ways. These included the immature guy who does not know how to behave, the guy needing recognition for his value as a sex partner, and the sleazy guy who sent dick pics just because he is sleazy. Then, there is the boy who is sexually aroused and seeks to turn a girl on with his random dick pic. Then, there is a fifth construction of the sending boy, the one who used a random dick pic, not seldom in peer groups, to harass a girl.

Setting the stage of an unequal gendered social position

Taking a step back, we tried to determine what was really going on with the senders and receivers of unsolicited dick pics. In the last phase of the analysis, the overarching theme, *Setting the stage of an unequal gendered social position*, emerged. 'Setting the stage' is a metaphor for how sending boys need the receiving girl, in different ways, in order to perform a hegemonic masculinity. In young people's understanding of the random dick pic, girls are involuntary 'actors' on that stage, necessary to mirror the boys' performance of hegemonic masculinity. Girls are involuntary actors and passive receivers, in the sense that the random dick pics are always unwelcome. However, while being involuntary actors on that stage, girls are forced to find strategies to cope with the different consequences of being a receiver of the (sometimes perpetual) unwelcome dick pics. As we tried to untangle the young people's own understanding, the picture of a constant navigation of gendered social positioning became quite clear. Digital subjectivities and being the 'right' (or hegemonic, as it were) type of boy are interwoven in the sending and receiving of the unsolicited dick pic. Being the right type of girl includes strategizing ways not to be perceived as 'the easy target'.

Discussion

This paper set out to answer the question of how young people understand unsolicited dick pics, or 'random dick pics,' in participants' own words, as well as how they construct the senders and receivers of such images. Both boys and girls agreed that sending and receiving such images were very common occurrences, and girls claimed that it started at an early age – around the age of 11–12, or as soon young people start to use social media.

Both girls and boys offered a diverse and quite complex understanding of the sending boy, considering several motives and explanations as to why boys would send unwanted dick pics: the 'guy wanting recognition', the 'sleazy guy', and the 'horny guy', were identified by both boys and girls. The understanding of the sending boy as the 'immature guy' and the 'sick guy' was evident only among girls, while only boys discussed the understanding of the sending boy as the 'harassing guy'. None of the constructions made by boys mirrored constructions of masculinity that would threaten hegemonic masculinity. On the contrary, all constructions supported hegemonic masculinity – even 'the sleazy guy,' who seems to display a certain assertiveness, and who sends dick pics to anyone just because he feels like it. Boys also argued that sending a dick pic was sometimes the overriding

priority, and that the recipient was of secondary importance. This is in line with Mandau (2020), who argues that sending a dick pic is intrinsically rewarding to the person engaged in it.

The understanding of the receiving girl was a less complex matter in the sense that only two subthemes emerged. However, 'the easy target' and 'the ordinary, everyday girl' are two subthemes representing a complex situation for girls in terms of navigating the consequences of being a receiver. However, just as girls can move from 'the ordinary, everyday girl' to 'the easy target', individual boys can represent several of the constructions, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) have shown that girls face a much greater pressure to regulate their digital spheres than boys, with starker consequences. Based on our interviews, boys as senders seem to 'navigate' consequences less; rather, there is more of a 'repertoire' of reasons for sending a dick pic.

March and Wagstaff (2017) have shown that Machiavellian personality traits (interpersonal manipulation, emotional coldness, and indifference to morality) predicted the sending of unsolicited dick pics among adults. In the present study, the young people's understanding reflects the idea of a personality-trait explanation regarding 'the sleazy guy', who would send unwanted dick pics just because he is 'sleazy' and possibly the 'sick guy', which may be interpreted as someone with a distorted personality trait. Individual behaviour problems or a lack of social skills are sometimes interpreted as immature interactions with the opposite sex, mostly within the developmental and educational psychology fields (McMaster et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). This is also in line with (Gillander Gådin, 2012), who in study of Swedish students in elementary school showed that boys' sexual harassment behaviours at that age were perceived by teachers as unchallengeable, because it was out of boys' control due to their youth and/or that they were just being boys. This is reflected in the girls' view of 'the immature guy' who, although he now has reached high school, just doesn't know how to properly express interest in a girl.

By constructing the senders this way, young people are making the phenomena of the unsolicited dick pic an individualized matter, and throughout the interviews, they fail to see the gender order that is being reproduced. With that said, it may be too much to ask that young people should be able to recognize this, as even adult women fail to do so. Amundsen (2021) has shown that women aged 18–38 who received dick pics failed to recognize and critically address the broader social structures at play that enable dissemination of the unsolicited dick pic in the first place.

Contrary to the findings of Charteris et al. (2018), who found that girls linked the dissemination of dick pics to the actions of confident individuals, the young people in our study linked these practices to a range of different incentives or explanations. These incentives included the need for recognition, sleaziness, immaturity, and sexual desire. The boys in our study also added the understanding of the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics as a form of harassment, an understanding that the girls did not share. Possibly, 'the harassing guy' could also fit into a Machiavellian personality traits framework, but this was not evident in the boys' own understanding of 'the harassing guy.' To harass girls, in their interpretation, was just something fun to do with a group of friends. Conroy (2013), Kimmel (2008), and Robinson (2005) argue that adolescent sexual harassment is part of a construction of gender, sexuality, and power relations, and this is reflected in the boys' understanding of the unsolicited dick pics as a means of harassment. Talking to these young boys and girls a discursive practice became evident, in which boys are expected to take part if they want to perform a hegemonic masculinity. This would explain why boys would be in peer groups while sending harassing dick pics to girls. Conroy (2013) points out that sexual harassment can be interpreted as a means for boys to police each other to display a hegemonic masculine stereotype like dominance over females. Therefore, sending an unsolicited dick pic will always strengthen and perpetuate a boy's performed identity as a man (to be). On the other hand, girls are a part of the same discursive practice, but as the receivers of unsolicited dick pics they involuntarily provide a staging of sorts for boys to perform the 'right type' of masculinity.

Gassó et al. (2019) concluded that the association between sexting and poor mental health, depression, and anxiety symptoms is mediated by coercion, victimization, and age. Girls did indeed

express several adverse reactions to their first unsolicited dick pic, usually at the age of 11 or 12. However, after the age of 15, girls seemed to employ different cognitive reconstruction techniques to try to control an incontrollable situation, such as learning to laugh about it, insisting that 'it's not even a thing anymore', and constructing the sending boy as 'sick'. Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) also found that while girls tend to laugh about it, they were at the same time reflecting over that fact and finding it 'terrible'. Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) interpret this a form of resistance, albeit shallow and individualized, with little impact on the wider rape culture underpinning the sending of unsolicited dick pics. The boys in our study, on the other hand, still expected girls 15 and over to have some sort of (adverse) reaction, and so boys kept sending unwelcome dick pics. The girls in our study did not talk much about their resistance strategies besides blocking people who send them unsolicited dick pics.

Boys' sense of sexual entitlement made them surmise that 'girls are so interested in the "down there"', as one girl put it. This is mirrored in all six constructions of the sending boy: 'the sleazy guy' sending dick pics to all the girls; the guy in need of recognition of value as a sexual partner, assuming the male sexual organ to be that which would make all the difference; 'the horny guy,' expecting the picture to turn the girl on; 'the sick guy' that must have something wrong with him to think he can send dick pics; and 'the immature guy' who mistakenly believes that sending an unsolicited dick pic to a girl he likes is a good idea. Finally, there was 'the harassing guy,' who expects the erect male sexual organ to be an effective tool to harass girls, well aware of how the male sexual organ can be perceived as intimidating. Waling and Pym (2019) have shown in a study of cultural framings of the dick pic in contemporary online publics, that even adult women found an unsolicited close-up of an erect penis aggressive and threatening.

This construction of the harassing guy reflects what Sills et al. (2016) call a rape culture as a constant backdrop to young people's daily (digital) lives. Sills et al. (2016) has shown 17-year-old girls' awareness of the rape culture as a taken-for-granted backdrop on social media, and this may provide an explanation for why the erect male sexual organ is so central in youth digital lives. Through social media use, teen peer networks can be an extension of a sexualized culture that is evident in broader society, as well. Hasinoff (2015) argues that non-consensual sexting (and not only the issue of unsolicited dick pics) is to be understood within the framework of sexual violence associated with a rape culture, victim-blaming, and systemic inequality. While teen gender-based harassment is not a new issue, social media can provide a more potent 'pay-off' for these harassing practices and perpetuate asymmetric power relations. If girls who receive an unwanted dick pic normalize and misinterpret 'the harassing guy' for 'the immature guy', the risk of further victimization increases, as they do not understand that boys are actually subjecting them to violence. Messitt (2014, p. 53) argues that this sort of gender-based harassment, 'is sinking further below the surface as teens harness new technology and more creative methods. These stealthier attacks leave targets mentally and emotionally taxed, carrying around a terrible secret, out of adult view.' The evasive nature of some social media, e.g. Snapchat, makes recognition and detection more difficult for parents, school staff, and even peers.

Our findings support the view posed by Sohn et al. (2019) that continuing usage of social media despite evidence of harm is common. Despite initial adverse reactions to the unsolicited dick pic, these young girls did not refrain from being a part of digital peer networks. Instead, they learned different coping strategies to handle unsolicited dick pics as well as the undue pressure to send images of themselves with explicit sexual content, which is also supported by Ringrose et al. (2013). While boys seemed to need girls for their performance of the 'right' type of masculinity, girls risked social-degradation and slut-shaming from boys and girls alike. This is in line with both Ringrose et al. (2013) and Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al. (2019), who conclude that the practice of sending dick pics and nudes rests on and reproduces gendered values, forming the basis for judging girls' and boys' sexual activities differently. As the unwelcome dick pic is just that – unwelcome – and as girls start to receive them at a very early age, girls are deprived of sexual agency, and cannot themselves decide when and if to start their (digital) sexual lives. Getting used to the invasion of privacy

(Amundsen, 2021), and being seen as an object and 'staging tool' for boys' and men's dick pic practices at a very young age, girls are deprived of an autonomous healthy initiation of their sexual lives. Tolman (2012, p. 753) maintains that it is very important to understand how girls' sexual desire might be embodied and developed under conditions of pervasive sexualization and self-sexualization, in pictures and practices based on the uninterrupted reproduction of gender inequity.

The performance of hegemonic femininity, as proposed by Paechter (2018), is not evident in these interviews, mainly because girls are not seemingly engaged in sending unsolicited dick pics to other girls. However, in the broader scope of this study, which includes a variety of forms of harassment and 'hate' on social media (Gillander Gådin & Dahlqvist, 2020), we can see that girls indeed are engaged in practices that can be interpreted as persevering hegemonic femininity.

Limitations

Because informants were recruited at Youth Centers (YC), this sample does not entirely reflect Swedish young people in general, which may affect transferability of the findings. According to Granlund (2009), young people that visit YCs in Sweden, are less academically motivated, and participate less in sports clubs and other organized leisure activities. In addition, it is possible that youth from one YC who know each other can have specific shared views. However, we do not have any indication that social media use is more frequent among young people at YCs compared to young people in general. More limiting, as far as transferability is concerned, is that these data mirror a mainly cisgender heterosexual discourse.

Dependability has been assured by a thorough account of the procedure and method of analysis used. Regarding confirmability of the data, and their representation here, the seemingly blasé attitudes towards the unsolicited dick pics expressed by the older girls may reflect an aversion to showing vulnerability to other girls and adults in the interview setting. On the other hand, these attitudes may very well be the result of attempts to use cognitive reconstruction to cope with the adverse consequences of receiving unwanted dick pics. We also received feedback from young interviewees who said it felt good to talk about these issues with someone who does not judge or panic. While our primary goal has been to represent the data as justly as possible, quotes were translated from Swedish to English, which may result in the loss of nuance in some cases.

The scope of these interviews was broader than the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics, as we asked participants about what was happening on social media in general. The interviews only lasted one hour, and we acknowledge in hindsight a lack of data regarding girls' incentives for sending sexually explicit images of themselves. As discussed in the current study, this issue relates to the sending of dick pics (unsolicited as well as solicited). A further elaboration of girls' incentives would likely have deepened our understanding of the dynamics and reproduction of unequal gendered social positions.

Future studies should also study dissemination practices of unsolicited dick pics in LGBTQ+ contexts, as this perspective is largely absent from our data.

Conclusions

The young people in our study constructed the senders and receivers of the unsolicited dick pic in a range of different ways. Some of the constructions of the sending boy were shared by both boys and girls. However, very important differences appear between boys' and girls' understandings of boys who might send an unsolicited dick pic with the sole aim of harassing a girl. While girls could find the receiving of a random dick pic as aggressive and threatening, they did not seem aware of boys' intentions to send random dick pics to harass girls, but rather interpreted this behaviour as sexual interest. In addition, girls did not recognize that for boys, sometimes, sending a dick pic was intrinsically rewarding, and the recipient of secondary importance.

In our interpretation of the practice of the unsolicited dick pic, it seems to be a way for boys to perform and stage a hegemonic masculinity by taking advantage of and reinforcing

what Hasinoff (2015) calls a rape culture prevalent in young people's digital lives. Girls' roles as receivers of unwanted dick pics make them involuntary actors in this drama, and hence, girls' sexuality is restrained and controlled by boys' perceived entitlement to send unsolicited dick pics. Accordingly, the sending of the unsolicited dick pic reinforces the prevailing unequal gender order, in particular as it relates to disrespect of girls' rights to self-government and sexual self-determination (Amundsen, 2021). By reinforcing rape culture, the dissemination of unsolicited dick pics can increase the risk for more severe types of sexual violence online, including masturbation videos, nonconsensual pornographic videos, and rape videos, or what Henry and Powell (2018) call technology-facilitated sexual violence.

Implications and recommendations

The findings of this study may inform social policy development in several ways. Educational efforts should address girls' incomprehension of the dick pic as a form of harassment, since misinterpretation of this behaviour as sexual interest may be potentially harmful for girls. In addition, school staff, professionals working with young people, and legal guardians must be made aware of the digital reality of the unsolicited dick pic, and should find ways to counteract this behaviour in boys and promote healthy digital interactions. In line with Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019), we argue that the focus of preventive measures should be on boys' behaviours, and change the associated norms. It is also important for adults to know that the phenomenon of the unsolicited dick pic is a reality in many young people's lives, and that young people are unlikely to share their experience with adults without help. Furthermore, to understand more about girls' mental health challenges, the issue of unsolicited dick pics must be addressed. With that said, panicking about the phenomena of the unsolicited dick pic does not challenge mainstream constructions of hegemonic masculinity. In order to do that, adults must recognize the broader social structures that enable the dissemination of the unsolicited dick pic in the first place. It is of the utmost importance to deconstruct the structures and normative constructs of gender and sexuality. This may offer an opportunity to address hegemonic structures and the polarization of gendered power positions.

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HD and KGG conceived of the study and conducted the data collection. HD conducted the data analysis with substantial comments from KGG. HD and KGG interpreted the results. HD wrote the manuscript with substantial comments from KGG.

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of the research, due to [ethical/legal/commercial] supporting data is not available.

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