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“A SLIPPERY SLOPE OF NAKEDNESS”: BOUNDARY WORK AND NUDE PHOTO EXCHANGE AMONG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN

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Background

In August of 2024, a gay male social media personality named Chris Olsen posted a series of TikToks where he spoke through tears about his experience having his nude and pornographic content shared on the internet without his consent, sparking a conversation among the gay community about the nature of online consent (Oliver, 2024). While many agree that this is a morally reprehensible practice, many still engage in it, with Chris’ callout inevitably causing people to go looking for the content he’s begging people not to share.

The distribution of revenge porn is not limited to prominent influencers with large followings. Empirical data suggests that gay and bisexual men who use geosocial dating apps (like Grindr) are significantly more likely to be the victims of revenge porn than both the general population and gay and the broader queer community (Waldman, 2019). It is clear, however, that despite evident risk, there are robust social norms among gay and bisexual men on dating apps where certain behaviors, regardless of perceived risk, are commonplace.

I conceive this phenomenon as a four-step process which gay and bisexual men undertake when engaging in online nude exchange: taking nude photos and videos, sharing them in intimate or otherwise dyadic contexts, disseminating them outside that context, and consuming the content once it is disseminated. This research offers a critical examination of each step in this process.

This research builds upon existing scholarship on networked intimacy among gay men, both on Grindr and across other platforms. Early work by Mowlabocus (2016) and Campbell (2014) on online embodiment and gay male subcultures provides the framework for these conversations. Others have explored Grindr specifically to investigate the constitution of an online sexual identity (Blackwell et al., 2015). Suenzo's Suggested Citation (APA): Restieri, A. (2025, October). “A Slippery Slope of Nakedness”: *Boundary Work and Nude Photo Exchange Among Gay and Bisexual Men*. Paper presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

(2024) recent work on Grindr fatigue also informs understandings of how gay men are experiencing online sexuality in processes that are increasingly feeling “scripted.”

This study conceptualizes the redistribution of nude photos and videos outside of the original conversation as a form of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) in which the contents of a dyadic intimate exchange can be distributed broadly as if they were porn. In considering public response and perception of this behavior, I find it helpful to consider Jane's (2021) work on lateral violence online in feminist contexts as a way of framing in-group aggression among those of a shared marginalized identity. Duffy et al.'s (2022) work on women's “displaced rage” also provides a helpful parallel and perhaps a framework for thinking about my potential findings, albeit outside of a gay male context.

Also of relevance to this work is the literature on sexting and new conceptions of pornography. Attwood's (2006) seminal theorizations about the sexualization of culture provide the framework for this analysis, as do her writings on the consumption of pornography and sexually explicit media (Attwood, 2005; Smith & Attwood, 2014). Literature on shifting and increasingly blurry definitions of pornography is nascent, with Paasonen (2024) publishing just last year on conceptions of dick pics as porn. Also of note is literature on the evolving nature of consent, with Groeneveld & Rentschler (2023) providing a critical lens to questions of consent. Dietzel (2024) applies this logic specifically to online queer contexts in his work on negotiations of sexual consent among gay and bisexual men on dating apps.

I apply theoretical principles from Habermas (2006) and, by extension, Papacharissi (2002) to this work, conceptualizing the online nude economy as a sort of gay, digital public sphere. Of interest as well are the mechanisms that govern this sphere, both from within and without, which are perhaps an apt application of Foucault's (1991) principle of governmentality. Also of note is Goffman's (1963) seminal work on stigma, which may be helpful in making sense of motivations for certain online behaviors especially regarding self-censorship and harassment.

By situating the story of Chris Olsen (and countless other gay men) within these disparate but interrelated literatures, I arrive at the fundamental questions driving my research: How do gay men navigate digital environments to take, share, disseminate, and consume nude and pornographic content? How, if at all, do they perceive the risks associated with such behaviors? What does revenge porn really mean in the gay male context?

Method

This research was taken up qualitatively in the form of semi-structured interviews. During the interview, participants were asked about their attitudes and behaviors across the four steps of the process at the center of my research: taking, sharing, and

dissemination, and consumption of nude and pornographic content. I constructed the questions to maximize participant comfort while still rigorously investigating the phenomenon of interest, taking care to avoid lines of questioning that are invasive or awkward and instead allowing participants to take the lead with the level of private information they choose to disclose.

Recruitment took place through a two-pronged approach: I leveraged my personal network by posting information about my study to my social media accounts, encouraging those eligible to participate to reach out if they are interested in having a conversation. Additionally, I leveraged my own Grindr profile, making my identity as a researcher known publicly and including information about the study in my profile bio, encouraging those who come across my profile to message me directly. These recruitment methods are informed by the “appnography” approaches discussed by Cousineau et al. (2019) and Johnson et al. (2023).

Recruitment and interviews were conducted over the course of several months, allowing me to employ theoretical sampling methods in both my recruitment and interview questions, whereby I was able to better tailor the research to the phenomena taking place in the “field” (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Interviews were transcribed and are currently being coded. Ultimately, interview transcripts will be analyzed using a grounded theory approach that foregrounds participant responses to inductively arrive at meaningful conclusions informed by participant responses (Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

Data collection concluded very recently, and as such, analysis is in the early stages. Coding categories appear likely to include visibility, ethics, moral behavior, accountability to the gay community, blame (including self-blame), and risk. Preliminary findings suggest patterns of self-contradiction among participants, where many report feelings of sexual liberation, indifference towards the potential for nudes to leak, and minimal calculation of risk. All the same, they take great precautions to mitigate potential risk, leveraging various app affordances and other behaviors to conceal identity and protect their privacy. Still, participants noted a feeling of protection among a queer community that looks out for one another—despite a seeming betrayal from the gay community in the case of Chris Olsen.

I expect these findings to have implications for research across the literature categories described in this abstract, including gay male sexual culture, sexting, porn, and online harassment, among others. My hope is that this research will contribute to a queering of discourse around sexting and revenge porn, allowing new ways of thinking about the core processes at the center of my research questions that are unburdened by heteronormative expectations and hegemonic constraints on online sexual expression.

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