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"Sexy selfies". The role of social media in adolescents' (self-)sexualization¹

Johanna M.F. van Oosten

Recently, scholars have started to pay attention to how sexualization may occur in social media, where adolescents are said to self-sexualize through posting sexy pictures of themselves (sexy self-presentation). Based on an overview of recent research on adolescents' social media use and online self-presentation, it can be concluded that some aspects of sexualization, such as self-objectification and the increased emphasis on physical and sexual attractiveness, also occur in social media. However, we still lack knowledge on other aspects of online (self-)sexualization, such as the occurrence of sexual objectification – by self and others - and whether sexual content is inappropriately imposed upon adolescents in social media. Moreover, although there is initial evidence that the use of social media decreases self-esteem and sexual satisfaction, we still lack knowledge on whether the same consequences that are said to occur for sexualization in traditional media also occur for self-sexualization in social media. Suggestions for future research on (self-) sexualization in social media are given, which also pertain to the unique aspects of social media (i.e., peer norms and self-perception) compared to traditional media platforms.

Introduction

In the past years, there has been an increasing amount of attention in the literature for sexualization of young people by the media. Sexualization is said to occur when "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a

¹ *(This chapter is an English translation of a Dutch journal article: Annemarie van Oosten (2016). "Sexy selfies": Over de rol van sociale media bij (zelf-) seksualisering onder jongeren. Tijdschrift voor Seksuologie, 40(2), 61 – 67.)*

thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person" (Zurbriggen et al., 2010, p. 1). Research on sexualization has focused mainly on mainstream and mass media (e.g., television, movies, music videos, Attwood, 2009; Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Ward, 2003; Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Reed, 2015). For instance, a content analysis of music videos showed that women are often portrayed as sex objects in such videos, by emphasizing women's body parts and sexually willing gaze (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). These images reinforce the message that women should be first and foremost judged on their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Several studies have shown that young people internalize sexualization in the media, which can have negative consequences, such as increased depression and self-objectification, and decreased self-esteem and body satisfaction, especially for girls (for an overview, see Zurbriggen et al., 2010).

Recently, it has been suggested that particularly young people apply sexualization to themselves and their peers, by engaging in sexy self-presentation on social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012; Ward et al., 2015). Based on previous content analyses of pictures on social network site profile pages, sexy self-presentation is defined in the present chapter as posting pictures in which one has a tempting or sexy gaze (Kapidzic & Herring, 2015), poses in a way that suggests sexual willingness, or is scarcely dressed (Crescenzi, Araña, & Tortajada, 2013; Hall et al., 2012). Research has shown that 15-25 percent of young people's profile pages in social media contain sexually suggestive material, including sexy pictures (e.g., Moreno, Parks, Zimmerman, Brito, & Christakis, 2009; Peluchette & Karl 2009) and the majority of young people seem to post pictures in which they pose in a tempting or sexually suggestive manner (e.g., Kapidzic & Herring, 2011). Showing off one's body is a regular type of online self-presentation, especially among girls (about 20% of all pictures, Hall et al., 2012). However, when the body is shown, this is usually done in revealing clothing (15% of pictures, Hall et al., 2012; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011), and to a much lesser extent by showing a (partially) naked body or by posing in swimsuits or underwear (e.g., Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015; Crescenzi et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2012).

Despite the growing number of studies on sexy self-presentation in social media, we still know little about what the implications of this type of

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behavior are for the sexual development of adolescents. Increasing our knowledge in this particular area is important, given adolescents’ high use of social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, et al., 2010; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesti, & Gasser, 2013). Furthermore, adolescence is a period in which sexual attitudes, behaviors and self-concepts are still developing and adolescents often look at their peers as examples of how to behave sexually (e.g., Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009; van de Bongardt, Yu, Dekovic, & Meeus, 2015). Social media may in particular be a relevant platform for adolescents to look at the (sexual) behavior of their peers for normative standards (Doornwaard, Moreno, van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, & Ter Bogt, 2014). Moreover, there is some evidence that adolescents’ exploration of their (sexual) self-concept may occur through sexual self-disclosure or self-presentation in social media (e.g., Ringrose, 2010, 2011; van Oosten, de Vries, & Peter, 2015). This makes adolescents particularly susceptible to potential sexualization influences that may occur in social media.

A first step in gaining a better picture of whether sexualization occurs in social media is to see whether adolescents’ online sexy self-presentation can be seen as self-sexualization. In order to do so, it is important to regard this behavior in relation to the criteria of sexualization as put forward by the APA task force, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter (Zurbriggen et al., 2010). In addition, we need to focus on whether the consequences of sexualization in mainstream media also hold for sexy self-presentation in social media, and what differentiates sexualization in mainstream media from (self-) sexualization in social media. In this chapter I will discuss recent research on sexy self-presentation with these goals in mind, and will give suggestions for future research on sexy online self-presentation.

To what extent can sexy self-presentation in social media be considered (self-) sexualization, and what are the consequences?

As mentioned above, sexy self-presentation in social media has been considered a form of self-sexualization, and the result of internalization of sexualization in mainstream media. To know whether this view is accurate, I will recount to what extent sexy online self-presentation satisfies the criteria for sexualization and whether it could lead to similar consequences.

Are sexy self-presenters only valued for their sexual appeal or behavior?

Sexualization is said to occur when a person's value comes only from their sexual appeal or when their physical attractiveness is judged solely by the level of sexiness. There is some evidence for the occurrence of the latter in social media. Several studies have shown that young people place a greater value on being sexy and attractive as they use social media more often. Especially girls are concerned with being considered attractive and sexy when they engage in self-presentation in social media (e.g., Albury, 2015; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Manago et al., 2008). For girls, it is important to present oneself as sexy and 'sexually confident', but they are at the same time reprimanded when they come across as too sexy and available (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015).

The use of social media has also been associated with an increased preoccupation with one's physical appearance and body surveillance among girls and women in the US (Manago et al., 2014), Australia (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), Belgium (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), and the Netherlands (de Vries, Peter, Nikken, & de Graaf, 2014). Moreover, one study has shown that it is not so much the use of social media in general but exposure to attractive peers in social media specifically that leads to a greater preoccupation with one's body and physical appearance (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). However, most of the studies to date have focused on general use of social media rather than sexy self-presentation in social media specifically. Furthermore, none of these studies focused on the value that is placed on being sexually attractive. In addition, with the exception of two longitudinal studies (de Vries et al., 2014; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015), research that has investigated the relationship between social media use and preoccupation with one's appearance is mostly cross-sectional. As a result, there is still little empirical evidence that social media use is the cause of such preoccupation rather than the consequence.

One (unpublished) longitudinal study showed that the more adolescents engaged in sexy self-presentation in social media, the more they considered sexual characteristics (e.g., looking sexy, being wild and flirtatious) to be important characteristics for their self-concepts six months later (van Oosten, de Vries, & Peter, 2015). Furthermore, girls and women who engage in sexy self-presentation are judged as less socially attractive and competent by other women and girls (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2014). These

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findings imply that a greater value is placed on being sexy, at the expense of other skills and characteristics, when one engages in sexy self-presentation in social media. However, there is as of yet no evidence that sexy self-presentation results in young people solely valuing themselves or other people based on their sexiness. More research on the association between sexy online self-presentation and the perceived importance of being sexually attractive is needed before we can draw conclusions about whether this criteria of sexualization occurs in social media.

Is sexy self-presentation conducive to sexual self-objectification or being sexually objectified by others?

There have been concerns that young people, and especially girls, will increasingly view themselves as an external observer as a result of engaging in sexy self-presentation, and may therefore also sexually objectify themselves (Hall et al., 2012). For instance, girls often pose in a submissive and sexually available way (Hall et al., 2012; Ringrose, 2010, 2011), or as ‘sexual objects’ that are looking for male attention by making ‘glamour shots’: pictures in which they are scarcely dressed, often in the context of partying (Bailey et al., 2013). However, objectification in the sense of showing one’s body without a face is not very prevalent in social media (Hall et al., 2012).

Longitudinal research has shown that the use of social media predicts greater self-objectification (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). As of yet, there is no evidence that sexy self-presentation in social media predicts actual *sexual* objectification, in the sense that it leads to the perception of others or oneself as sexual objects that serve for other people’s pleasure. It should be noted that this may occur for more explicit forms of self-presentation, such as *sexting* (i.e., sending sexually explicit pictures of oneself to others, mostly by phone). However, research linking sexting to perceptions of sexual objectification is still lacking.

Is sexuality inappropriately imposed on young people in social media?

Sexualization is said to occur when children and adolescents are involuntarily confronted with adult sexuality, and is different from self-motivated sexual exploration or age-appropriate exposure to information about sexu-

ality (Zurbriggen et al., 2010). As young people are the ones who are posting and sharing their sexy pictures in social media, and since these pictures can be considered sexually suggestive rather than sexually explicit (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2012), it seems unlikely that sexuality is inappropriately imposed on young people in social media. Again, it should be noted that a distinction needs to be made between sexy self-presentation in social media, and sexting. Interviews with young adult men and women showed that young women feel pressured by men to send sexually explicit pictures of themselves and that young men, in turn, feel pressured to own such pictures and to forward them to others (Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). Not much is known about whether young people experience similar pressures to engage in the more sexually suggestive forms of self-presentation in social media. There is however a recent study that showed that engaging in sexy self-presentation in social media predicted a greater willingness to engage in sexting among adolescent girls (van Oosten & Vandebosch, 2017), which shows that sexy self-presentation and sexting may in some cases be related. This association may have to do with the pressure that girls experience to present themselves in increasingly sexually explicit ways. More research is needed on how young people, and especially younger adolescents, are inappropriately confronted with sexual content in social media or experience pressures to distribute such content.

Are the consequences of sexy self-presentation in social media similar to consequences of sexualization in traditional media?

Until now, research on the consequences of sexy self-presentation in social media for adolescents' (sexual) well-being and self-perceptions is scarce. Some studies did show that problems that have been associated with sexualization in mainstream media (e.g., increased depressive feelings, self-objectification and decreased self-esteem and body satisfaction, Zurbriggen et al., 2010) may also be associated with social media use. For instance, social media use has been shown to predict a decrease in girls' physical self-esteem, an increase in being preoccupied with one's body and decreased sexual satisfaction over time (Doornwaard, Bickham, et al., 2014). However, more research is needed to determine whether this is the result of *sexy self-presentation* in social media specifically or rather due to general social media use.

Is (self-) sexualization in social media different from sexualization in traditional media?

When answering the question whether sexy self-presentation in social media can be seen as the internalization of sexualization in traditional media, it is conducive to look at the similarities as well as the differences between social and traditional media. There is reason to assume that sexualization in traditional media extends to social media. Young people see how their favorite celebrities engage in sexy self-presentation in mainstream media and how such self-presentation is rewarded with attention, status and admiration. This makes it more likely that young people will take over these behaviors (e.g., *Social Cognitive Theory*, Bandura, 2001). Also, because of the frequent exposure to sexualized images in the media, young people may see engagement in sexy self-presentation as ‘normal’ and ‘realistic’ behavior (e.g., *Cultivation Theory*, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). Moreover, as traditional gender roles, such as that women need to be sexually attractive and that men need to be dominant and emotionally distant, are frequently endorsed by the media it seems likely that young people take over these gender roles when they present themselves in social media (Bailey et al., 2013; Crescenzi et al., 2013; Hirdman, 2007; Kapidzic & Herring, 2015; Siibak, 2009, 2010; Tortajada, Araña, & Martinez, 2013). Similarly, according to the *Media Practice Model* (Steele & Brown, 1995; Steele, 1999), young people are motivated to look for sexual content in the media driven by (the development of) their sexual identity. Subsequently, they will take over sexual messages from the media and apply them to their own behavior, including their sexy self-presentations in social media (Bobkowski, Shafer, & Ortiz, 2016; Perloff, 2014).

Research has shown, for instance, that frequent exposure to sexually objectified women in the media is associated with women’s self-sexualizing behaviors, both offline (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009), and online (Kapidzic & Herring, 2014). Similarly, young women have reported to feel pressured by images of sexy and physically attractive women in the media to present themselves in sexualized ways as well (Manago et al., 2008). Moreover, the increased sexy self-presentation of boys seems to run parallel to the increased portrayal of men as sex objects in the media (Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015). Recent longitudinal research among Dutch youth has shown that frequent exposure to sexualized media content (e.g., reality docu-soaps such as MTV’s *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore*) predicts sexy self-presentation on social network sites

(Vandenbosch, van Oosten, & Peter, 2015). Similarly, a recent cross-sectional study showed that adolescents that frequently consume sexual media content prefer more extreme types of sexy self-presentation (Bobkowski et al., 2016).

The idea that young people apply sexual messages from media to their online sexual behaviors is also supported by longitudinal research showing that adolescents' acceptance of sexual objectification and instrumental attitudes towards sex – attitudes that are frequently endorsed in mainstream media – predicts their exposure to sexy self-presentations of others in social media (van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2015). However, exposure to sexy self-presentations did not further reinforce these sexual attitudes, which suggests that the consequences of sexy self-presentations in social media differ from those of sexual portrayals in traditional media (van Oosten et al., 2015).

Social media differ from traditional media in two aspects in particular. First of all, social media are platforms where young people communicate with their peers (Barker, 2009; Gross, 2004; Lenhart & Madden, 2007), which makes the role of peer norms more important in social media compared to traditional media. Second, self-presentation allows for the process of self-perception, which refers to observing oneself as an external observer, which has a unique influence on one's self-concept. These two defining aspects of social media will be further discussed below.

The role of peers and peer norms in social media

The difference between social and traditional media is most apparent when looking at the influence of peers. Young people use social media mostly to stay in contact and communicate with peers (Boyd, 2007; Barker, 2009; Gross, 2004; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). As a result, peer influences are particularly strong in social media compared to traditional media. Young people want to be popular and belong to a peer group and one way to achieve this goal is to present oneself as beautiful and sexy as possible in social media (Albury, 2015; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Shafer, Bobkowski, & Brown, 2013). A study among Estonian teens showed that looking sexy in pictures was considered an important way to become popular among one's peers (Siibak, 2009). However, teens seem to make a distinction between consciously trying to be sexy (e.g., posing in underwear) and looking sexy in a 'nor-

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mal’ picture (e.g., posing in swimwear on the beach). The latter seems to be more accepted than the former (Albury, 2015).

Furthermore, when young people have friends who value being sexy and wild they are more likely to present themselves as sexy in social media (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). Similarly, looking at peers who engage in sexy self-presentations in social media can increase adolescents’ perceptions of how normal such behavior is, and can subsequently increase their engagement in sexy self-presentation (e.g., Cookingham & Ryan, 2014; Moreno, Brockman, Rogers, & Christakis, 2010). Research among German adolescents showed that sexy self-presentation in social media occurred more often among those adolescents who had a greater need for popularity and who believed that many of their friends engaged in sexy self-presentations (Baumgartner et al., 2015).

Among Dutch adolescents, it has been previously shown that sexual displays on social network sites are related to adolescents’ perceived peer norms regarding sex (Doornwaard, Moreno, et al., 2014), and that such peer norms can in turn influence adolescents’ willingness to engage in sexual behavior (van Oosten, Peter, & Vandenbosch, 2017). These studies show the importance of peer norms and values and the profound influence they can have on young people’s (sexual) behavior online. Thus, peers and peer norms seem to play an important role in adolescents’ (self-) sexualization in social media, perhaps even more important than is the case for sexualization in traditional media. Moreover, as the above mentioned research suggests, consequences of sexy self-presentation in social media regarding sexual attitudes and behavior may occur through such peer norm influences.

The role of self-perception in social media

Social media allow their users to present themselves to a large audience, which elicits unique processes that did not previously occur for other types of media use (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010). These processes can be defined as *self-perception*, *biased scanning* and *public commitment* (e.g., Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994), which often go hand in hand in social media. *Self-perception* takes place when people observe themselves from the perspective of an external observer (Bem, 1972). When young people present themselves as sexy to other people, they will thus perceive themselves as a sexy person. In addition, when thinking of how to present

oneself in a sexy way a process called *biased scanning* takes place, where one searches one's memory for information about sexy characteristics (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981). This makes such characteristics more salient in memory, which can subsequently influence self-evaluations (Schlenker et al., 1994). Finally, people usually strive to present themselves in a consistent way to others. This *public commitment* makes it more likely that sexy self-presenters will continue to behave in sexy ways towards others (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010; Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006). Based on these processes, it can be expected that sexy self-presentation in social media makes young people perceive themselves as more sexy and feel more pressure to engage in sexy behaviors, more so than looking at sexual content in traditional media. This opens up an interesting avenue for future research in investigating to what extent the processes of self-perception, biased scanning and public commitment take place in social media, how this makes sexualization in social media different from traditional media, and what the consequences of these processes are for young people's sexual self-concepts and behaviors.

Main Conclusions

This chapter consists of an observation of important research themes around adolescents' (self-) sexualization in social media, as well as several suggestions for future research on this topic. It should be noted first and foremost, that this is not a systematic literature review and that it is not presumed that this chapter provides an exhaustive review of the literature. That said, even though research on the role of social media and online self-presentation is still in its infancy, there seems to be initial evidence that self-sexualization occurs to a certain extent in this type of media platform. Studies have shown that the use of social media is associated with placing a greater value on being sexy and physically attractive. Whether this is the result of *sexy self-presentation*, and whether this also includes placing value solely on being sexually attractive at the expense of other skills and characteristics, is in need of further investigation. Furthermore, although sexy self-presentation does seem to be related to self-objectification, it is still unknown whether this also extends to sexual objectification, nor do we have a clear picture of whether and to what extent sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon adolescents in social media. As a final note, with the exception of a few longitudinal studies (e.g., Vandenbosch et al.,

2015; van Oosten et al., 2015, 2017; van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017), the majority of studies that were discussed in this chapter are cross-sectional. As a result, we know little about the consequences of sexy self-presentation in social media.

Moreover, the body of literature discussed in this chapter shows that social media, and sexy self-presentation in social media, should be distinguished from sexualization in traditional media in the sense that the role of peer norms and the possibility of self-perception elicit unique processes in social media that do not occur in such profound ways in traditional media. Furthermore, earlier research on the influence of sexual media content has mostly focused on how young people take over messages from the media through processes such as identification and imitation (e.g., Shafer et al., 2013). Such processes may occur in different, or perhaps even stronger, ways in social media, as it concerns the identification with, and imitation of, actual peers. Social media may thus essentially have a different function in the lives of young people, and therefore influence their sexual development in different ways.

To conclude, given the unique role of social media, and sexy self-presentation in particular, in the current media environment of young people, it is important to fill the above mentioned gaps in the literature. Only then can we have a clear picture of whether sexy self-presentations in social media can be seen as self-sexualization, and what the consequences are of such behavior for young people’s sexual development.

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