



## Sexual self-presentation on social network sites: Who does it and how is it perceived?



Susanne E. Baumgartner\*, Sindy R. Sumter, Jochen Peter, Patti M. Valkenburg

Amsterdam School of Communication Research, ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

The aims of this study were to investigate (a) the role of peer factors in adolescents' sexual self-presentation on social network sites, and (b) how adolescents who present themselves sexually online are evaluated by others. 238 high school students (aged 12–18) evaluated either a sexual or non-sexual online presentation of same-sex and opposite-sex peers. Moreover, they filled in a questionnaire about their own self-presentation behavior. Findings showed that peer norms played a crucial role in whether adolescents posted sexual pictures of themselves online. Moreover, need for popularity was a strong predictor for posting such pictures. Girls who presented themselves in sexual ways were evaluated more negatively by other girls but more positively by boys. Similarly, boys who presented themselves in sexual ways were evaluated more positively by girls but not by boys.

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### 1. Introduction

The exploration of sexuality and the development of a sexual identity is an important part of adolescents' lives (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996). In this context, the internet has become an important source for sexual information and sexual exploration for young people (Shafer, Bobkowski, & Brown, 2013; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). On the internet, adolescents do not only consume but may also produce sexual content by presenting themselves in sexual ways (Shafer et al., 2013), notably on social network sites. This online sexual self-presentation includes the posting of sexual pictures on social network sites. These pictures may feature adolescents in sexy or sexually suggestive poses or in sexy or semi-naked clothing (e.g., swim- or underwear) (Van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2014).

Online sexual self-presentation fulfills important functions for adolescents. By presenting themselves in sexual ways, adolescents may try to conform to prevailing standards of sexual attractiveness (Shafer et al., 2013). Moreover, by receiving feedback from their peers, online sexual self-presentation may help them to reduce uncertainties that are inherent in the process of developing a sexual self (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996).

Online sexual self-presentation, however, may also be problematic because it may lead to unwanted online sexual solicitations (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007) as well as, potentially adverse

offline sexual encounters (Bobkowski, Brown, & Neffa, 2012). In order to identify adolescents who might potentially experience these negative consequences, it seems important to know who present themselves sexually online and which factors predict online sexual self-presentation. To date, however, not much is known about the predictors of online sexual self-presentation because most studies merely focused on the prevalence of this behavior, and on gender differences in this behavior (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Moreno, Parks, Zimmerman, Briot, & Christakis, 2009; Pujazon-Zazik, Manasse, & Orrell-Valente, 2012).

As online sexual self-presentation occurs in online platforms that are characterized by interactions with peers, such as social network sites (SNS), a crucial predictor of sexual self-presentation appears to be the influence of peers. In order to be accepted by their peers, adolescents may strive for an online self-presentation in line with prevailing peer norms (Moreno, Brockman, Rogers, & Christakis, 2010; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). As sexiness is considered important by many adolescents (Shafer et al., 2013), the display of sexual pictures may be a means for adolescents to comply with peer norms and to become popular among their peers. Moreover, adolescents with specific individual difference factors, such as high need for popularity and low resistance to peer influence, may be more eager to present themselves in sexual ways in order to become popular among peers. The first aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate peer norms, as well as need for popularity and resistance to peer influence as predictors of sexual self-presentation.

It is not only important to understand how adolescents present themselves online, but also to know whether the way they present

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [s.e.baumgartner@uva.nl](mailto:s.e.baumgartner@uva.nl) (S.E. Baumgartner).

themselves online influences how they are viewed by their peers. Recent studies have shown that SNS users take even subtle cues on social network profiles into account when forming an impression of other users' personality, sociability and popularity (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Walther & Parks, 2002). However, the majority of these studies has focused only on general online self-presentation but has not assessed how *sexual* self-presentation informs our impression of others. As a consequence, we do not know how adolescents perceive other peers who present themselves sexually online. The second aim of this study, therefore, is to examine how adolescents evaluate peers who engage in online sexual self-presentation. As evaluations of sexy peers may strongly differ for same sex and opposite sex evaluations (Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011), we focus on how adolescents evaluate sexual self-presentations by both same sex and opposite sex peers.

## 2. Sexual self-presentation on social network sites

The selection of pictures plays a crucial role in online self-presentation (Strano, 2008). Pictures are the most important source of information for users when judging others' profiles (Moreno, Swanson, Royer, & Roberts, 2011; van der Heide, D'Angelo, & Schumaker, 2012). Previous research has shown that adolescents know very well which type of pictures are valued the most by their peers and that the presentation of the "right" pictures can promote their social acceptance among peers. As a result most adolescents carefully present those pictures of themselves that fit these peer standards (Salimkhan, Manago, & Greenfield, 2010; Siibak, 2009). Siibak (2009), for example, provides evidence that adolescents know that it is important to not only post attractive pictures but also 'sexy' pictures online in order to gain popularity among other social network site users. Posting sexual pictures online may thus be a means to increase peer popularity.

To date, only a few studies have focused on sexual self-presentation on social network sites. For example, Pujazon-Zazik et al. (2012) found that 16% of adolescents who had a profile on a US teen dating site displayed some kind of sexual reference, such as pictures or text referring to sexual activities. In that study, girls were more likely to post sexual references. Similarly, Moreno et al. (2009) found that among 18 year old MySpace users, 24% posted sexual references on their profile. Investigating more specifically the display of sexual pictures, Kapidzic and Herring (2011) reported that 15% of males and 8% of females aged 16–19 years posted partially nude pictures of themselves on a teen dating site. In contrast, Hinduja and Patchin (2008) reported that among adolescents younger than 18 only 5% posted pictures of themselves in swimsuits or underwear on MySpace.

Posting sexual pictures on social network sites may be problematic because it may lead to unwanted sexual solicitations (Mitchell et al., 2007). Moreover, it has been related to (risky) sexual offline behavior (Bobkowski et al., 2012). More recently, online sexual self-presentation has also been related to the reinforcement of potentially problematic sexual self-images (Shafer et al., 2013; Van Oosten, 2015). For example, Van Oosten (2015) showed that the more frequently adolescents engaged in sexual self-presentation on social network sites, the more important became their sexual self-concept for their overall identity. This implies that sexual self-presentation may increase specific aspects of an individual's identity that are related to sexual behavior and attitudes. However, posting of sexual content on social network sites does not only have an influence on one's own attitudes and behavior but may also influence others who are exposed to these images. Recent studies show that exposure to online sexual self-presentations of others may lead to changes in sexual behavior and in sexual self-image (Van Oosten et al., 2014; Van Oosten, 2015).

Due to these potential consequences of online sexual self-presentation, it is important to understand which factors predict adolescents' engagement in sexual self-presentation. Although the existing studies give an important first indication of the prevalence of online sexual self-presentation, most of these studies are based on content analyses, and are thus unable to link the prevalence of posting sexual pictures to other peer-related or individual difference factors that may explain some of the differences in the prevalence of sexual self-presentation in the studies.

## 3. Predictors of posting sexual pictures on social network sites

To understand why adolescents post sexual pictures of themselves on social network sites, it is important to take their primary audience into account and to understand how they would like to be perceived by this audience. The primary audience of adolescents is their peer group and research has shown that most adolescent have an intrinsic desire to be popular among these peers (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000). As a result, how adolescents present themselves online and whether they present themselves sexually or not may highly depend on peer norms and adolescents' sensitivity to these norms.

### 3.1. Peer norms as predictor of online sexual self-presentation

Several studies have shown that peer norms have a strong influence on offline as well as online sexual behavior (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Moreno et al., 2009). According to social norms theory (Berkowitz, 2005), adolescents' behavior is highly influenced by peer norms. Peers are the most important reference group for most adolescents, and their friends' behavior therefore is guiding their own behavior (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). If adolescents have friends who engage in a specific behavior, they are more likely to engage in this behavior as well (Berkowitz, 2005). This has also been shown in an online context. For example, Moreno et al. (2009) found that young adults were more likely to post sexual references online if they had friends who also did that. Moreover, Baumgartner et al. (2011) showed that adolescents were more likely to engage in online sexual risk behavior if they had friends engaging in this behavior as well. We, therefore, expect that adolescents are more likely to post sexual pictures of themselves online if they have friends who post such pictures as well. Thus, similarly, those adolescents who feel that their friends do not post sexual pictures online, will also be less likely to post these pictures themselves.

**H1.** Adolescents who have more friends, who post sexual pictures online, are more willing to post sexual pictures online as well.

### 3.2. Need for popularity as predictor of online sexual self-presentation

Research has consistently demonstrated the role of individual differences in adolescents' internet-based sexual activities (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2011). Consequently, specific individual difference factors may also predict whether adolescents decide to post sexual pictures online. At least two individual difference factors may influence whether adolescents are more or less willing to post sexual pictures online: need for popularity and resistance to peer influence. Adolescents with a high need for popularity are motivated to do things that make them more popular or make them appear more popular among their peers (Santor et al., 2000; Utz et al., 2012). Utz et al. (2012), for instance, have shown that individuals with high need for popularity engage in more strategic self-presentation on social network sites than others. This suggests that adolescents with high need for popularity are eager to present

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