



Sexy online self-presentation on social network sites and the willingness to engage in sexting: A comparison of gender and age

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated whether engaging in sexy self-presentations on social network sites (SNSs) or exposure to sexy self-presentations on SNSs predicts the willingness to engage in sexting. A second aim of the present study was to investigate whether adolescent girls demonstrate stronger relationships between (exposure to) sexy online self-presentations on SNSs and willingness to sext than adolescent boys and young adult men and women. A two-wave panel survey among 953 Dutch adolescents (13–17 years old, 50.7% male) and 899 Dutch young adults (18–25 years old, 43.9% male) showed that engaging in sexy self-presentations on SNSs increased the willingness to engage in sexting, but only among adolescent girls. Exposure to sexy self-presentations of others did not predict the willingness to engage in sexting. The findings call for more research on the role of gender and age in the link between sexy self-presentation and sexting.

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1. Introduction

There has been increasing academic and public attention to how young people present themselves in public and private forms of mediated communication, especially the sexual nature of such self-presentations (e.g., [Draper, 2012](#); [MSNBC, 2008](#); [Thiel-Stern, 2009](#)). With regard to public online communication, recent research has found that more than one in ten adolescents engages in sexy self-presentation on social network sites (SNSs) ([Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012](#)). Based on previous research, sexy self-presentation can be defined as self-presentation on SNSs, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, which is characterized by sexy poses and sexually suggestive – but not explicit – body display (e.g., [Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015](#)). When adolescents engage in body display on SNSs, they especially show their body by wearing revealing clothing (15%), but rarely pose in lingerie, underwear, bra (2.25%), or swimwear (1.31%), and are seldom nude (1.36%) ([Hall et al., 2012](#)). In fact, the community guidelines of social media often dictate that posting sexually explicit and nude content on SNSs is not allowed (e.g., [Facebook, 2016](#); [Instagram, 2016](#)).

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However, some teens also report more sexually explicit forms of sexy self-presentation, namely sending sexually explicit and (partially) nude pictures of themselves in inter-personal conversations via the internet or smartphone, a practice called 'sexting' (e.g., Lenhart, 2009; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012). Although sexy self-presentation on SNSs and sexting are sometimes considered the same type of behavior, they can be seen as two different types of sexual self-expression: Sexting is more sexually explicit and less prevalent, and sexy self-presentation on SNSs is sexually suggestive and more prevalent (e.g., Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). Previous research on these types of sexual self-expression suggests that they are related to each other. For instance, previous research has shown that sexting is associated with overall internet use (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014) and mediated communication with peers (Campbell & Park, 2013). Sexual self-disclosure on SNSs, in turn, has been related to more offline sexual risk behavior (e.g., casual sex behaviors, Bobkowski, Brown, & Neffa, 2012), and sexual experience (e.g., Doornwaard, Moreno, van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, & Ter Bogt, 2014). These findings suggest that there may also be an association between sexy self-presentations on SNSs and sexting.

The present study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it is the first study to longitudinally examine relationships between sexually oriented practices on SNSs and sexting. The study thus extends prior cross-sectional studies on the correlates of sexting behavior (e.g., Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, & Cyders, 2013; Drouin et al., 2013) and sexy self-presentations on SNSs (e.g., Doornwaard et al., 2014). Second, the study pays particular attention to the potential moderating role of gender and age in the studied relationships, in line with literature on gender socialization (e.g., Tolman, 2002; Zurbriggen et al., 2010) and adolescent sexual development (e.g., Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Studying the moderating role of gender and age is particularly relevant because motivations for, as well as the meaning of, sexting likely differ between adolescents and young adults (e.g., Lippman & Campbell, 2014), and males and females (e.g., Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). However, no study to date has compared adolescent boys and girls and young adult men and women in sexting related attitudes and behaviors.

In this study, we focused on the willingness to sext because behavioral willingness is considered an appropriate measure of risky (sexual) behavior among youngsters (e.g., Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock, & Pomeroy, 2008; Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998). Measuring willingness to engage in certain risk behavior is a way to tap into adolescents' decision making when it comes to such behavior (Gerrard et al., 2008). The willingness to engage in a behavior refers to the likelihood with which people think they would engage in a behavior when the situation lends itself for this behavior. The measure has been shown to be a better predictor of risky behavior than people's intentions to engage in that behavior (Gerrard et al., 2008; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995). Investigating behavioral willingness can be considered particularly relevant in the context of sexting because a situation in which a peer asks for a sexually explicit picture is likely to occur in adolescence: In a study by Temple et al. (2012), 57% of the adolescents reported that they had been asked to send a sext.

1.1. Sexy self-presentations on SNSs and willingness to sext

According to the principles of self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), there is reason to expect that young people's sharing of sexually suggestive pictures of themselves on SNSs and their willingness to engage in sexting are related to each other. Self-perception theory states that when people engage in self-presentation, they infer beliefs about themselves and their behavior by observing themselves from an audience perspective (Bem, 1972). As a consequence, when people present certain characteristics to others, these characteristics become more salient to the self and are more likely to guide future behavior (e.g., Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994). Sexy self-presentation on SNSs is often characterized by sexually adventurous and outgoing behavior (e.g., Kapidzic & Herring, 2014; Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Ringrose, 2010, 2011; Tortajada, Araña, & Martínez, 2013). Thus, when individuals present themselves as sexy on SNSs, they may observe themselves as sexually adventurous and outgoing. This observation may trigger the willingness to engage in more sexually adventurous behavior, such as sexting.

The literature on sexting among young adults has suggested that behavior characterized by the salience of being sexually adventurous and outgoing is associated with sexting behavior (e.g., Chalfen, 2009; Drouin et al., 2013). For instance, being flirtatious and wanting to initiate sex are among the most frequently mentioned motivations to engage in sexting by young adults in both committed and casual relationships (Drouin et al., 2013). Such associations may also exist for adolescents and their willingness to engage in sexting, given that actual sexting behavior is not as high in adolescence as it is in adulthood (e.g., Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Drouin et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012). Based on previous literature on actual sexting behavior and the premises of self-perception theory, it can thus be expected that engaging in sexy self-presentations in social media will increase the salience of being sexually adventurous. This may, in turn, predict an inclination to present oneself in increasingly adventurous ways, and thus a greater willingness to engage in sexting. We thus hypothesized: More frequent engagement in sexy self-presentations on SNSs is related to a higher willingness to engage in sexting (H1).

Next to one's own engagement in sexy self-presentation, looking at the sexy self-presentations of others on SNSs may also be related to one's willingness to sext. One of the tenets of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) is that the observation of behavior of models who are similar to the observer (e.g., peers) may stimulate the observer to enact similar behavior and to learn about important attitudes and beliefs about a behavior (Bandura, 2001). Because sexy self-presentation seems to convey the message of sexual availability, individuals who observe sexy self-presentations of peers on SNSs may implicitly learn from their peers to be more sexually active (e.g., Kapidzic & Herring, 2014; Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Ringrose, 2010, 2011; Tortajada

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