

Sexpectations: Male College Students' Views about Displayed Sexual References on Females' Social Networking Web Sites

Megan A. Moreno MD, MEd, MPH^{1,*}, Michael J. Swanson BA¹, Heather Royer PhD, FNP-BC², Linda J. Roberts PhD³

¹ School of Medicine and Public Health, Department of Pediatrics, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

² School of Nursing, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

³ School of Human Ecology, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

ABSTRACT

Study Objective: Sexual reference display on a social networking web site (SNS) is associated with self-reported sexual intention; females are more likely to display sexually explicit content on SNSs. The purpose of this study was to investigate male college students' views towards sexual references displayed on publicly available SNSs by females.

Design: Focus groups.

Setting: One large state university.

Participants: Male college students age 18–23.

Interventions: All tape recorded discussion was fully transcribed, then discussed to determine thematic consensus.

Main Outcome Measures: A trained male facilitator asked participants about views on sexual references displayed on SNSs by female peers and showed examples of sexual references from female's SNS profiles to facilitate discussion.

Results: A total of 28 heterosexual male participants participated in seven focus groups. Nearly all participants reported using Facebook to evaluate potential female partners. Three themes emerged from our data. First, participants reported that displays of sexual references on social networking web sites increased sexual expectations. Second, sexual reference display decreased interest in pursuing a dating relationship. Third, SNS data was acknowledged as imperfect but valuable.

Conclusion: Females who display sexual references on publicly available SNS profiles may be influencing potential partners' sexual expectations and dating intentions. Future research should examine females' motivations and beliefs about displaying such references and educate women about the potential impact of these sexual displays.

Key Words: Adolescent, Sexual behavior, Internet, Social networking sites, College student

Introduction

Social networking web sites (SNSs) are extremely popular among college students; over 94% of college students currently maintain a SNS profile.^{1,2} SNSs are commonly used to initiate and maintain friendships, and anecdotal reports suggest that college students may also use SNSs to evaluate potential romantic partners.^{2,3} College students display a variety of personal information on SNS profiles, including the profile owner's sexual preference, whether the profile owner is currently in a romantic relationship, and sexual references.^{4–8} The definition of sexual references on SNSs includes sexually explicit material or discussions about sexual behaviors.⁹ On SNS profiles, these references can include photographs portraying the profile owner in a sexually suggestive way or personal descriptions of sexual experiences.^{4,5}

Females are more likely than males to display sexual references on a SNS profile.⁵ Our recent work evaluated whether sexual reference display on a public SNS was

associated with sexual intention, sexual experience, or risky sexual behavior. We found that among older adolescents, display of sexual references on a SNS was associated with sexual intention.¹⁰ If these sexual references are interpreted by viewers as messages of sexual intention, then these references may influence the sexual expectations of potential romantic partners who view the SNS profile.

While sexual behavior among college students is common, it is not without potential for negative consequences.¹¹ Rates of sexual activity among adolescent and young adult males and females are comparable, but the potential negative consequences of sexual behavior such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are disproportionately distributed among females.^{12,13} Female college students are also more likely to be victims of sexual assault or sexual coercion compared to male peers.¹²

This study focuses on female college students because females are more at risk for negative consequences associated with sex and females are more likely to display sexual references on their SNS profiles.¹² Our goal for this preliminary investigation was to investigate male college students' views towards sexual references displayed on publicly available SNSs by females.

* Address correspondence to: Megan A. Moreno, MD, MEd, MPH, School of Medicine and Public Health, Department of Pediatrics, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2870 University Ave, Suite 204, Madison, WI 53705, USA

E-mail address: mamoreno@pediatrics.wisc.edu (M.A. Moreno).

Materials and Methods

Participants

Between July and September 2009 participants were recruited through purposeful sampling at a large state university. Eligible subjects were current undergraduate students who were male and interested in dating females. A trained male facilitator identified key contacts within university housing and several campus organizations with the goal of recruiting males from a variety of social groups. The facilitator informed the key contacts on the objectives of the research. The key contact then recruited 2–3 male peers to accompany him to the focus group. All individuals who attended the focus groups and met the eligibility requirements participated. Each participant gave written consent for participation. Participants received a meal and a \$15 gift card for participating. The University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board approved this project.

Focus Groups

A trained male facilitator conducted semi-structured focus groups. Focus groups were designed to explore male college students' views and interpretations of sexual references displayed on female college students' SNS profiles. Focus groups were the optimal method to investigate this topic as they allow for participant interaction and encourage

participants to build on other's comments, which leads to greater insight into why certain opinions or views are held. However, given that sexual discussions are an intimate topic, relatively small (3–4 participants) focus groups were used to create an atmosphere in which participants could comfortably discuss such a topic.

Before the start of each focus group, participants provided their age in years. The facilitator then introduced the project and explained the purpose of the focus group. Male participants were encouraged to discuss their thoughts and interpretations of displayed sexual references on college females' SNS profiles. The facilitator began with open-ended questions followed by probing questions. Participants were initially asked to discuss their experiences with SNSs and their interpretations of sexual references displayed on SNSs. Later during the meeting, participants were shown examples of sexual references drawn from SNSs used in our ongoing research studies and asked to comment on them. Figure 1 provides the list of questions used in each focus group, as well as examples of sexual references that were shown to participants in each focus group to generate discussion. These references included data from Facebook status updates (personally written text that typically describes the profile owner's actions, emotions, or plans), personal photographs, and bumper stickers (downloaded icons displayed on SNS profiles). Each focus group lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

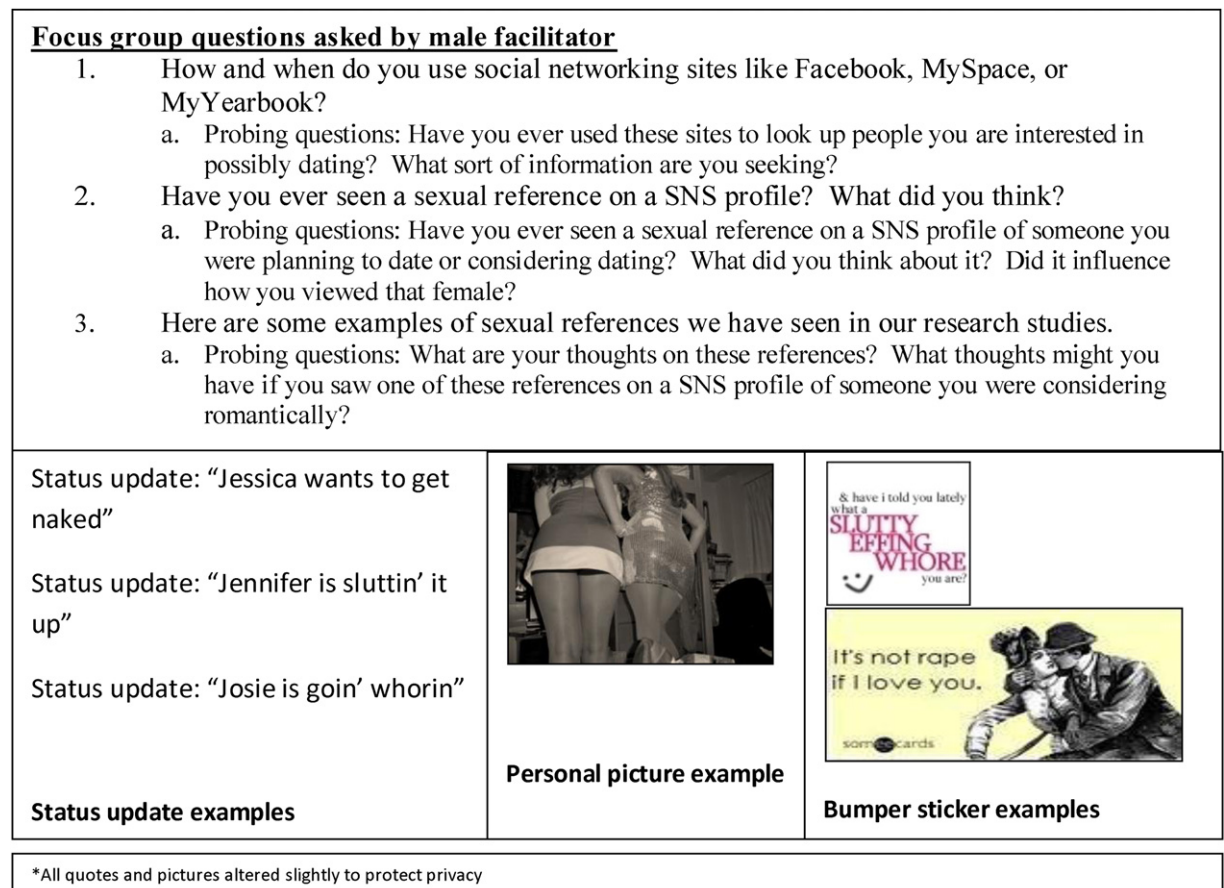


Fig. 1. Focus group questions and example references shown to participants during focus groups.

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