I "like" the way you look: How appearance-focused and overall Facebook use contribute to adolescents' self-sexualization[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has related the use of social networking sites (SNSs) to body image disturbances among adolescents, but studies examining how SNSs affect adolescents' engagement in self-sexualizing behaviors are lacking. The current correlational study among 640 adolescents ($M_{age} = 16.27$, $SD = 1.60$) aimed to take a more nuanced look at the influence of SNS use, by examining the influence of talking about appearance-related topics with friends on Facebook in addition to total amount of Facebook use. The findings showed that appearance conversations on Facebook, but not total amount of Facebook use, was directly related to self-sexualizing behaviors. In addition, both self-objectification and the belief that complying with the prevailing appearance ideals is rewarded (with, for example, popularity, increased self-esteem, and romantic success) proved to be valid explanatory mechanisms for the examined relations. Results further showed that both boys and girls were affected by appearance-focused Facebook use, although girls scored higher on the key variables and the model fit better among the girls.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become integrated into the lives of youth around the world, with 81% of adolescents reporting using them, especially Facebook, which remains the most popular (Madden, 2013). One of the unique features of SNSs is the display of primarily visual images (Perloff, 2014) and, therefore, the focus on physical appearance (Ringrose, 2011). A recent trend has been the posting of increasingly sexualized photographs. Kapidzic and Herring (2014) showed that 51.7% of teens' profile pictures on a popular chat site displayed seductive behavior, and 20.4% featured revealing clothing. In light of these findings, SNSs may be considered a contributing factor to the (self-) sexualization of youth.

Although studies indeed document a link between SNS use and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Eckler, Kalyango, & Paasch, 2016) and self-objectification (e.g., Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015), results are not always significant (e.g., Ferguson, Muñoz, Garza, & Galindo, 2014), and some questions remain about its

role in self-sexualization. First, there have yet to be any studies linking SNS use to adolescents' engagement in self-sexualizing behaviors. We believe that our study makes a significant contribution to the literature by focusing on these behaviors, and on SNSs. The unique features of SNSs enable appearance-related experiences, such as interpersonal surveillance and comparison with similar others, that differentiate SNS use from traditional media use (Perloff, 2014). Second, because SNS use, and Facebook use in particular, consists of many types of actions, it is possible that stronger connections to self-sexualization may emerge with appearance-related discussions versus overall amount of use. Therefore, we aimed to take a more nuanced look at the influence of SNS use by examining the influence of talking about appearance-related topics with friends on SNSs in addition to total amount of SNS use. Third, because evidence demonstrates that several factors mediate connections between media use and self-sexualization (e.g., Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), we explored the explanatory value of integrating insights from social cognitive theory within the objectification theory framework. Specifically, we investigated whether and how SNS use is related to adolescents' acceptance of appearance ideals as personal standards *because* they buy into the associated benefits, such as popularity and romantic success, and whether this internalization, in turn, may relate to their level of self-objectification. Lastly, we explored whether

engagement in self-sexualizing behaviors (e.g., applying make-up or drinking muscle-enhancing beverages) could be considered a behavioral manifestation of adolescents' self-objectification.

1.1. Facebook use and appearance-focused behaviors

Adolescent girls experience considerable cultural pressure to take on a sexualized appearance (APA, 2007). Indeed, sexiness together with thinness and youthfulness (Ganahl, Prinsen, & Netzley, 2003; Markula, 2011) are part of the contemporary appearance ideal for women. Evidence also indicates that young men have become increasingly invested in their appearance, as well (e.g., Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008), and are expected to have a muscular upper-body and low body fat (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2002). Appearance ideals are often presented as something to strive for and are associated with positive outcomes, such as popularity and involvement in romantic relationships (Klein & Shiffman, 2006).

Exposure to such idealized images in traditional media has been related to appearance-focused behaviors such as dieting among adolescent girls (Field et al., 2001), adopting strategies to gain muscle tone among adolescent boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001), and risky appearance management such as using laxatives and receiving botox injections among college students (Lee & Johnson, 2009). With the proliferation of the internet and SNSs, scholars have started to examine the role of new media in pressuring youth to comply with narrowly defined appearance ideals (for review, see Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Specifically, SNSs are argued to provide certain affordances (i.e., "an interface feature; that facilitates a certain action"; Ellison & Vitak, 2015), which shape how users engage with that environment (boyd, 2011). For instance, SNSs allow users to construct a profile, connect with others, and view others' shared content (Papacharissi, 2011). These inherent features of SNSs lead individuals to strategically construct their profiles to be seen by others (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). For body image scholars, the asynchrony of SNSs seems to be especially important, because it allows time to compose and edit information (Walther et al., 2010), and thus offers users the opportunity to control their self-presentation (boyd, 2011). Additionally, the affordances of interactivity and searchability may foster interpersonal surveillance and social comparisons with similar others (Ho, Lee, & Liao, 2016). These unique features of SNSs, including Facebook, render them important sociocultural factors to consider in body image research.

Ringrose (2011), for example, showed that 14- to 16-year old girls worried about how they looked on SNSs. The pressure to conform to an appearance norm is high (de Vries, Peter, Nikken, & de Graaf, 2014), and users tend to post photos that comply with current beauty standards (Siibak, 2010) or "untag" photos that do not (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). As such, SNSs appear to be saturated with idealized imagery. Moreover, it has been argued that the idealized images of peers may be more relevant than those of celebrities (Manago et al., 2015). A recent review of the literature concluded that the use of SNSs is related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). In fact, in Vandenbosch and Eggermont's (2012) study, SNS use but not traditional media use was related to body surveillance (i.e., the monitoring of one's appearance). With regard to Facebook use in particular, Cohen and Blaszczynski (2015) showed that Facebook use was more strongly related to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders than use of conventional media. Facebook use has also been related to adolescents' increased likelihood of trying to lose weight (Sampsa-Kanyinga, Chaput, & Hamilton, 2016) and their desire to undergo cosmetic surgery, indirectly through appearance investment (de Vries et al., 2014).

Despite these findings, studies linking SNS use to adolescents' *actual* engagement in behaviors to look more sexy are, to our knowledge, lacking. Some related findings have emerged for traditional media exposure. Nowatzki and Morry (2009) found that women who viewed more sexually objectifying magazines and television programs were more likely to engage in sexualizing behaviors, such as taking part in a wet T-shirt contest. Although not incorporating media measures into their study, Smolak, Murnen, and Myers (2014) also argue that objectifying messages pressure girls and women to self-sexualize. Likewise, McKenney and Bigler (2014) found that girls who reported a higher internalization of the notion that sexual attractiveness to men is a woman's primary value spent more time on appearance-focused behaviors (i.e., applying make-up) in a laboratory task than on competence behaviors (i.e., rehearsing the script). These findings indicate that girls are vulnerable to the effects of exposure to sexualizing messages. We argue that adolescents may be exposed even more often to idealized and sexualized images through Facebook because of the affordances offered by SNSs, including the constant flow of information and the editability of content (Ho et al., 2016), and adolescents' overall investment in online appearances (Ringrose, 2011). Moreover, based on prior findings on the influence of Facebook use on appearance investment (e.g., de Vries et al., 2014), we hypothesize that:

H1. Total amount of Facebook use is positively related to adolescents' engagement in self-sexualizing behaviors.

In addition to the influence of media, scholars have examined the role of peers in the development of body image concerns (e.g., Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). Much research exists on the appearance culture in which both media and peers jointly impose beauty ideals by creating an environment in which physical appearance is glorified and valued (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Appearance conversations with friends are argued to be fueled by media content (Clark & Tiggemann, 2007) and to reinforce appearance ideals by adding personal relevance to them (Jones et al., 2004). In fact, studies have shown that such appearance conversations are related to self-objectification (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2014) and eating disturbances (e.g., Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

With the advent of SNSs, the way adolescents interact has changed, and a large part of their communication with friends now takes place through these sites (Madden, 2013). Specifically, adolescents use online communication as a way to extend their offline interaction with peers (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2016). Conversations about appearance-related topics may thus have shifted to the social network platform, as well. We argue that it is important to examine how appearance conversations on SNSs relate to adolescents' body image outcomes for three reasons. First, SNSs are designed to stimulate feedback by means of comments and likes (Koutamanis, Vossen, & Valkenburg, 2015). Second, because SNSs, such as Facebook and Instagram, mainly consists of visual images and thus focus on appearances, conversations about one's appearance are likely to occur (de Vries, Peter, de Graaf, & Nikken, 2016). Finally, specific activities on SNSs have been identified as particularly problematic (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). For instance, Meier and Gray (2014) showed that appearance-related exposure on Facebook (i.e., activities involving photos), but not overall Facebook use, was positively correlated with internalization, self-objectification, and drive for thinness, and negatively correlated with weight satisfaction. In light of these findings, we hypothesize that:

H2. Engagement in appearance conversations on Facebook is