



## Full length article

## Sexual intensity of adolescents' online self-presentations: Joint contribution of identity, media consumption, and extraversion

Piotr S. Bobkowski<sup>a,\*</sup>, Autumn Shafer<sup>b</sup>, Rebecca R. Ortiz<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Kansas, 1435 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS 66045, USA<sup>b</sup> School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon, Box 1275, Eugene, OR 97403, USA<sup>c</sup> College of Media and Communication, Texas Tech University, Box 43082, Lubbock, TX 79409, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescents produce and distribute a vast quantity of digital media content. A growing literature examines the sexually explicit (i.e., nude) content that adolescents share online. Because adolescents' sexual content need not be sexually explicit, however, this study examined the sexual intensity with which adolescents choose to present themselves in the context of a social media platform. Exemplifying the variability of adolescents' online sexual self-presentations, survey participants ( $N = 265$ ; age range: 13–15 years) constructed social media profiles using components (e.g., photos, fashion brands) that varied in sexual intensity. In accord with predictions drawn from the Media Practice Model, the study found that the sexual intensity of adolescents' online self-presentations is a product of the sexual self-concept, a relationship that is partially mediated by sexual media diet and moderated by extraversion. This study bridges emerging research on sexual self-presentation with established literature on adolescents' sexual media uses and effects.

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescents in the United States produce and distribute a vast quantity of digital media content (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Researchers working at the intersection of media use and adolescent sexual development are increasingly interested in examining the sexual media that adolescents produce and distribute, and the implications of these behaviors for their sexual health and identity formation. "Sexting" (i.e., sending sexually explicit photos or messages via an electronic device) has received the most research attention among the sexual media production practices in which adolescents engage (e.g., Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Temple & Choi, 2014; Temple et al., 2012). Adolescents can produce and distribute sexual text, photo, video and audio content via many social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat). Some studies have focused specifically on young people's sexual disclosures in these channels (e.g.,

Bobkowski, Brown, &amp; Neffa, 2012; Ringrose, 2011).

The present study advances two conceptual components within the literature on adolescents' sexual media production and distribution. Much of the prior work in this domain assessed behaviors related to sexually explicit, that is, "nude or nearly nude" (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 15) digital images or videos. Young people, however, also can present themselves online sexually without being sexually explicit (Smahel & Subrahmanyam, 2014). They can communicate a level of sexual suggestiveness through physical poses, facial expressions, and clothing in their online photos, for instance, or through the music or brands they endorse (i.e., "Like") on social media.

This study therefore first widens the analytic lens by examining the *sexual intensity* with which adolescents present themselves in digital spaces, including subtle and suggestive sexual content. Second, the study conceptualizes and tests how these online sexual self-presentations are shaped by the adolescents' own sexual identities, the sexual media they report consuming, and their personality. Prior studies have identified several discrete correlates of adolescents' digital sexual self-presentations including demographics, personality traits, and overall media use (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012). This study advances this literature by using a theoretical framework informed by the Media Practice

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [bbobkowski@ku.edu](mailto:bbobkowski@ku.edu) (P.S. Bobkowski), [ashafer@uoregon.edu](mailto:ashafer@uoregon.edu) (A. Shafer), [rebecca.r.ortiz@ttu.edu](mailto:rebecca.r.ortiz@ttu.edu) (R.R. Ortiz).

Model (MPM) (Shafer, Bobkowski, & Brown, 2013; Steele & Brown, 1995) to integrate components of both identity, sexual media consumption, and personality as mutual contributors to adolescents' sexual self-presentations.

Data from an online questionnaire completed by 265 13- to 15-year-olds were used to test the study's theoretical framework with a moderated mediation model (Hayes, 2013). Exemplifying the variability of adolescents' online sexual self-presentations, participants selected elements that varied in sexual intensity to represent themselves in a fictitious social media platform. This study contributes to the growing literature and theory on adolescents' sexual self-presentation by bridging this emerging research domain to the established literature on adolescents' sexual media uses and effects (e.g., Wright, 2011). There are also practical advantages of the more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between identity, sexual media consumption, personality, and sexual self-presentation in digital spaces that this study advances. Most teens growing up today will make decisions about how to present themselves in social media. For instance, 91% of teens who use social media post photos of themselves, and 84% post about their media interests (Madden et al., 2013). A more thorough understanding of the factors involved in the sexual nature of adolescents' social media self-presentations can inform related policies and educational initiatives on such topics as online privacy, online safety, and sexual health.

## 2. Conceptual background

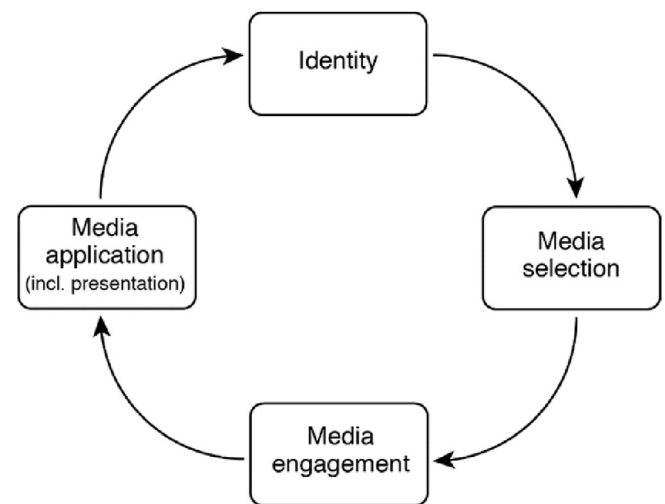
### 2.1. Adolescents' sexual media distribution and identity

The vast majority of adolescents in the United States have regular access to the Internet, and most own at least one personal mobile device, such as a smartphone and/or a tablet (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Most adolescents are active on at least one social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), and many are active on multiple platforms (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, et al., 2013; Madden, 2013). Using their mobile devices and social media platforms, adolescents share with their social networks the digital content they create or encounter online (i.e., text, photos, videos). Some of this content can be sexual in nature. Approximately one in 10 adolescents (10.2%) has presented him- or herself sexually by distributing sexually suggestive text or photo content, according to a meta-analysis of six studies (Klettke et al., 2014).

Studies of adolescents' sexual self-presentations in digital spaces—specifically, sexting—have linked the incidence and frequency of these behaviors with a series of discrete demographic and behavioral correlates. Age predicts sexting, for example, with older adolescents more likely to sext than younger adolescents (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Dake et al., 2012). Some evidence also suggests that non-white adolescents are more likely to sext than their white peers (Dake et al., 2012). Adolescents who are sexually active are more likely to sext than those who are not sexually active; and adolescents who engage in risky sexual behaviors are more likely to sext than those who do not (Dake et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012). Greater Internet use and more frequent texting also are linked to a higher probability of sexting (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Dake et al., 2012). While these prior studies identified discrete populations and behaviors associated with higher incidence of sexual self-presentation through sexting, integrative research that examines how combinations of these characteristics relate to adolescents' sexual self-presentations is lacking. A more cohesive understanding of how these factors combine to inspire adolescents' sexual presentations can inform educational initiatives and policies related to online safety, online privacy, and sexual health.

This study aims to frame sexual self-presentation online within a coherent theoretical context and to conceptualize it as the outcome of identity, media consumption, and personality. According to the Media Practice Model, the production and distribution of self-expressive digital content constitutes one component of a broader, self-reinforcing process (Shafer et al., 2013). In the model's original conceptualization, Steele and Brown (1995) found through interviews with adolescents in their bedrooms that most forms of media in which the adolescents engaged had connections to how they made sense of their lives, such that their own identities influenced what media they interacted with and how they interpreted and applied these media to their lives. The model (see Fig. 1) thus holds that adolescents' identities shape their media selections, interactions, and applications, and that these practices in turn also influence the adolescents' identities. Adolescents' backgrounds and interests, which reflect their identities and “lived experiences,” play a role in how they select, interpret, and apply media and eventually, in a cyclical fashion, how they see themselves (i.e. their self-concepts) in both private and public spaces (Hawk, Vanwesenbeeck, de Graaf, & Bakker, 2006; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Steele, 1999; Ward, 2003). Peter and Valkenburg (2006), for example, found that adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit materials was predicted by identity indicators, such as gender and sexual interest, and by selection and exposure to other sexual media. Steele (1999) found that how teens saw themselves (i.e., their identities) influenced the type of media they liked best, how they interacted with that media, and thus how they applied that media to their everyday lives.

Similarly, according to the Media Practice Model, whether an adolescent distributes a piece of media depends on the extent to which the media reflect the adolescent's identity (Shafer et al., 2013). Adolescents can “Like,” “Share,” “Retweet,” and “Favorite” media content in social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr, and disseminate these self-referencing media to their social networks. They can also create and distribute social media updates, selfies, digital videos, and other forms of digital self-presentation. In creating and sharing all of this content, adolescents draw on their identities and the media they consume, producing media that reflect their real and aspirational selves (Shafer et al., 2013) and co-constructing their identities in the digital realm (Smahel & Subrahmanyam, 2014).



**Fig. 1.** The Media Practice Model, showing the cyclical process by which an adolescent's identity shapes his or her media selection, interaction, and application; these practices, in turn, also influence the adolescent's identity.

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