Young women with sexy social media photos seen as less competent, study finds

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Girls and young women who post sexy or revealing photos on social media sites such as Facebook are viewed by their female peers as less physically and socially attractive and less competent to perform tasks, a new study from Oregon State University indicates.

"This is a clear indictment of sexy social media photos," said researcher Elizabeth Daniels, an assistant professor of psychology who studies the effect of media on girls' body image. Daniels' findings are based on an experiment she conducted using a fictitious Facebook profile.

"There is so much pressure on teen girls and young women to portray

themselves as sexy, but sharing those sexy photos online may have more negative consequences than positive," Daniels said.

Girls and young women are in a "no-win" situation when it comes to their Facebook photos, Daniels said. Those who post sexy photos may risk negative reactions from their peers, but those who post more wholesome photos may lose out on social rewards, including attention from boys and men, she said.

"Social media is where the youth are," she said. "We need to understand what they're doing online and how that affects their self-concept and their self-esteem."

Daniels' research was published today in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*. The article, titled "The price of sexy: Viewers' perceptions of a sexualized versus non-sexualized Facebook profile photo," was co-authored by Eileen L. Zurbriggen of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Daniels conducted the research while on the faculty at OSU-Cascades and received two Circle of Excellence grants from OSU-Cascades to support the study. She is now an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs.

For the study, Daniels created two mock Facebook profiles for the fictitious 20-year-old Amanda Johnson. In both versions, Amanda liked musicians such as Lady Gaga, books such as "Twilight," and movies like "The Notebook," that would be appropriate for a person her age.

The only difference between the two was the profile photo. The photos were actual high school senior portrait and prom photos of a real young woman who allowed the photos to be used for the experiment.

In the sexy photo, "Amanda" is wearing a low-cut red dress with a slit up one leg to mid-thigh and a visible garter belt. In the non-sexy photo, she's wearing jeans, a short-sleeved shirt and a scarf draped around her neck, covering her chest.

Study participants were 58 teen girls, ages 13-18, and 60 young adult women no longer in high school, ages 17-25. They were randomly assigned one of the profiles and asked questions based on that profile.

The participants were asked to assess Amanda's physical attractiveness (I think she is pretty), social attractiveness (I think she could be a friend of mine), and task competence (I have confidence in her ability to get a job done) on a scale from 1-7, with one being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree.

In all three areas, the non-sexy profile scored higher, indicating that those who viewed that photo thought Amanda was prettier, more likely to make a good friend and more likely to complete a task. The largest difference was in the area of task competence, suggesting a young woman's capabilities are really dinged by the sexy photo, Daniels said.

The research underscores the importance of helping children and young people understand the long-term consequences of their online posts, Daniels said. Parents, educators and other influential adults should have regular conversations about the implications of online behavior with teens and young adults, Daniels suggested.

"We really need to help youth understand this is a very public forum," she said.

The research also highlights the need for more discussion about gender roles and attitudes, particularly regarding girls and young women, she said.

"Why is it we focus so heavily on girls' appearances?" she said. "What does this tell us about gender? Those conversations should be part of everyday life."

Daniels' advice for girls and young women is to select social media photos that showcase their identity rather than her appearance, such as one from a trip or one that highlights participation in a sport or hobby.

"Don't focus so heavily on appearance," Daniels said. "Focus on who you are as a person and what you do in the world."

Provided by Oregon State University