

# Sexual media youths consume reflected in their online self-presentation

April 19 2016, by Mike Krings



When we hear about adolescents and sexual behavior online, it's often in the context of scandal, such as when young people get in trouble for sexting. But even when they are not being sexually explicit, adolescents often present themselves online with varying degrees of sexual intensity. A new study shows that the media that young people consume and their sexual self-concept predict how sexually they present themselves online.

Given the relatively new nature of [social media](#), little attention has been paid to how sexual content in media is reflected in the way adolescents present themselves online.

"How sexually [young people](#) present themselves online reflects the sexual nature of the media that they consume," said Peter Bobkowski, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Kansas and lead author of the study. "Researchers have studied sexual media effects for a long time, but we have rarely made the link between media consumption and presentation. If teens present themselves based on what they see in the media, then we can study it the same way we do other media effects, such as violence."

Bobkowski and co-authors surveyed 265 adolescents age 13-15 with parental consent and had them construct a social media profile using media components such as photos, fashion brands, television channels and websites that varied in sexual intensity. They found the sexual intensity of the profiles they created was mediated by "sexual self-concept," which is influenced by sexual media diet. The study, co-authored by Autumn Shafer of the University of Oregon and Rebecca Ortiz of Texas Tech University, was published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*.



Participants in the study were told they were testing a new social media platform called "Mee." Asked to choose content to display that accurately represented them, they chose one item from each of seven screens that displayed female photos, male photos, song lyrics, TV channels, clothing brands, video games and magazines. Each screen showed six items within one category that varied in sexual intensity based on pretests that found, for example, people rated Hollister as a more sexual clothing brand than Old Navy or MTV more sexual in nature than the History Channel.

After completing the profile, participants completed the Winter sexual self-concept scale, a 12-question survey assessing perceived sexual readiness and self-efficacy. The findings showed the higher a participant's sexual self-concept—or how sexually mature they reported being—the higher the sexual intensity of their online profiles. Also, males tended to present themselves with greater sexual intensity than their female counterparts.

"The young people who were most likely to present themselves with sexual intensity had a higher sexual self-concept," Bobkowski said. "So the more sexually developed adolescents were, the more likely they were to choose the more sexually intense items for their profiles."

The findings also showed that participants with a higher sexual self-concept also tended to consume more sexual media in their everyday lives.

The findings are significant in that in an age when social media use

among young people is nearly ubiquitous, there are a number of reasons to study the effects such as legal ramifications of sexual behavior online, what such behavior means for young people developmentally, how adolescents think of themselves and more.

"We argue that what young people put online and how intensely they represent themselves sexually is a media effect," Bobkowski said. "Their self-presentation mirrors what they learn about sex via the media. Once we know this, we can study sexual self-presentation like any other [media](#) effect, such as violence, and better understand the role it plays in young peoples' lives."

Provided by University of Kansas

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