How Social and Mass Media Relate to Youth’s Self-Sexualization: Taking a Cross-National Perspective on Rewarded Appearance Ideals

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## Authors

Trekels J.;Karsay K.;Eggermont S.;Vandenbosch L.

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## Sample

1,983 early and middle adolescents (12- to 16-year-olds) from seven schools in Austria, eleven schools in Belgium, four schools in South Korea, and five schools in Spain (Austria: N = 368; Belgium: N = 675; Spain: N = 564,; South-Korea: N= 376)

# Abstract

Although media exposure has been related to cognitive preoccupation with appearance,
research rarely investigated adolescents’ behavioral self-sexualization. To address this gap,
the present study among 12- to 16-year-olds (N = 1,527; 50.2% girls) in Austria, Belgium,
Spain, and South-Korea (1) investigates whether different types of media use relate to self\_x0002\_sexualization, (2) explores the explanatory value of rewarded appearance ideals, and (3)
considers culture and gender as moderating factors. Despite cultural variation, a general trend
of increasing self-sexualization with social media use and magazine reading appeared across
the countries. Moreover, women’s magazine reading and rewards were related to self\_x0002\_sexualization among all the girls across the countries, which suggests that girls may be more
vulnerable to the examined effects. Overall, this study provides a better understanding of the
unique contribution of specific media genres to youth’s self-sexualization and points at the
importance of social media use in girls’ and boys’ engagement in sexualizing appearance
behaviors across four countries.

# Outcome

"Social media use relates to adolescents’ inclination to behaviorally invest in a sexualized appearance. An association between sexualizing media use and self-objectification showed that media type moderated the effect size and that the effect was stronger for online media (and video games) as compared to television. An association between media use, internalization of rewarded appearance ideals (IRAI), and self-sexualizing appearance behaviors among adolescents seemed scattered across the countries. Exposure to music videos was only positively associated with Belgians’ IRAI and engagement in self-sexualizing appearance behaviors. These differences can be explained by the popularity of certain media types in certain countries. Youth may likely endorse a common set of values because of global television and the internet.
Both Instagram and Facebook are characterized by a focus on physical appearance and the display of increasingly sexualized images. Especially Facebook use was more strongly related to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders than traditional media. Time spent on social media was directly related to adolescents’ self-sexualization, whereas exposure to prime time television, romantic movies, music videos, and men’s magazines was not. IRAI and self-sexualizing behaviors were only significantly related among all the girls, a null-finding was found among boys. This coincides with the salience of rewards for girls who engage in self-sexualizing appearance behaviors in society. Girls’ tendency to buy into the idea that looking attractive would bring about certain benefits, such as happiness or popularity, increased their inclination to behave accordingly. " (Trekels et al., 2018, pp. 22-27)