

/R/AMISEXY?: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE DEPICTION OF SEXUAL  
APPEAL ON THE SUBREDDIT AMISEXY?

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## **Introduction**

This research project examines sexual appeal in social networking sites, by analyzing posts on Reddit's subreddit forum: "AmISexy?". Social media has had a significant impact on how people present themselves on popular platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Bareket-Bojmel et al 2015). Moreover, this research is relevant to sociology because it involves depictions of sexual appeal, the Internet, and mass accessibility. The intersection of these is important for a variety of reasons including, who is accessing the site to comment and/ or post the pictures as well as what are those posts and comments saying about the community as a whole. As a result of mass accessibility, there is an important question some people want others to answer, and that is, "Am I Sexy?". The concept of people seeking verification from others is no new revelation, but, it is different on a platform that is generally anonymous in which people are compelled to ask strangers to rate their physical appearance. This is of interest because it examines the depictions of sexual appeal in an anonymous environment with less accountability, which may give space to truthful opinions of these users. For these reasons, the topic of sexual appeal in relation to social networking sites could best be approached sociologically.

Reddit is a social networking site for discussions on what is new and popular on the Internet. Along with the site being a hub of new and popular things, Reddit hosts many sub forums that allow users to subscribe to more specific interests. Although Reddit is a great community to explore and keep updated on web trends, it can be a very intimidating platform to those who have not been acquainted with it. It can be intimidating due to its volume of content, as well as the website consisting mostly of

males which according to a Pew Research study found that 6% of online adults were redditors in which men ages 18-29 consisted of the largest group.

## **Literature Review**

The study of sexual appeal in Social Networking Sites (SNS) is a relatively new area of research. Social media has had a significant impact on how people present themselves on popular platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Bareket-Bojmel et al 2015). Through the technological advancements like social media, the social influence provides mass accessibility, which enables a fresh discussion on the role of sexual appeal and SNS in our society. The research in SNS are approached more quantitatively than qualitatively as a result, the reviewed articles in this discussion are mostly quantitative in their findings. The research on presentation in social networking sites applies theoretical knowledge of studies that examine body image, social comparison, and self-worth, which intersects with gender and age (Vogel et al., 2014). The SNS phenomenon and sexual appeal are significant areas of study because they have a profound impact on members of society and our ideals and values; how we define or construct what is important in our daily lives, as well as help shape our standards of beauty, and how we present these ideas on social networking sites. These values and standards of sex appeal trickle down to the social environment, and debase those who do not fit the desired image.

Research on sexual appeal draws from various theories of body image that discuss bias of physical attractiveness. Kwan and Trautner's (2011) examine the outcomes of beauty biases by testing the *Lookism Theory*, which postulates that, "physically attractive

people are in fact treated better in many areas of social life” (17). Kwan and Trautner’s study discusses previous evidence that those who are not considered attractive face discrimination and stigma. In the case of women, discriminatory judgment takes place when their bodies do not conform to thinness. Kwan and Trautner’s experiment used photographs of attractive women and unattractive women with a group of student participants, to examine how physical attractiveness delivers positive associations, which may lead advantages and privileges for attractive individuals. The results of the study showed that students associated attractive women with success, more often than unattractive women (Kwan and Trautner 2011). By observing students’ beauty biases and how these biases may affect individuals who are considered attractive or not, Kwan and Trautner found that many students “never realized how different people are treated based on looks” (21). Moreover, Kwan and Trautner stressed how the majority of time people do not recognize their own bias. Furthermore, Kwan and Trautner’s study also taps into the “Halo effect” theory, which claims we are more likely to associate positive characteristics to someone who is attractive. For example, celebrities who are attractive we categorize as having good characteristics, such as being intelligent and funny, even though we do not know them personally. This idea of attractiveness we attribute to celebrities, we also apply in our own lives, especially in specific subcultures like the subreddit “AmISexy?”.

While body image is not the same in all cultures, as it varies by social groups, through generations, and also regionally, in our culture, thinness has been a consistent theme of body idealization, mainly in relation to women. Ghaznavi and Taylor (2015) illustrated this in their study about a new trend on SNS called “thinspiration”, which is

usually written as a hashtag[1] for many posts on Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and Tumblr. In these posts women will use pictures or “inspirational” quotes showing others to not fall “victim” to eating too much food, or really any food at all, in order to maintain a thin, though unhealthy, figure (Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015). These illustrations promote eating disorders by showing protruding areas of their bodies such as the ribs, clavicle, and hipbones (Ghaznavi and Taylor 2015). Ghaznavi and Taylor base their study on two theories: *Objectification Theory*, and *Social Cognitive Theory*. The *Objectification Theory* refers to a person being, or transforming into, an object for the pleasure of others. The *Social Cognitive Theory* concludes that people learn from a constructed behavior, and will imitate such behavior when they find similarity and social support. With wide accessibility to the Internet and SNS, it is not shocking to see the emergence of a community that celebrates the “ideal” thin body in such a way, encouraging behaviors that are tied to cultural issues, which we do not fully address. Consequently, both men and women, especially when younger, view such images that promote unrealistic expectations of how a person should look according to social norms and form biases about beauty standards, bodies, skin color, hair type, and other.

Theories on Social Comparison on SNS have produced much interest for research. In “Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem,” the researchers look into social networking sites and suggest that the use of such sites can affect the user’s self-esteem by long-term exposure (Vogel et al. 2014). They discuss the effects of engaging in SNS that usually involves the upward or downward social comparison, where individuals find themselves comparing their lives with “superior others” that encompass positive attributes (Vogel et al. 2014). In contrast, downward comparison, is the process of

comparing one self to “inferior others” who exhibit negative attributes (Vogel et al. 2014). As a result, people internalize what society says is attractive or sexually appealing and compare themselves to others in order to attain that idea; appearance. The work of Johnson and Knobloch-Westerwick’s (2014) comments on a similar idea, by linking social comparison theory to mood management theory. In these theories, the scholars discussed how downward social comparison is used to make a person’s mood improve where “individuals compare themselves to others in their environment (including mediated environments) for purpose of self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self enhancement” (Johnson and Knobloch-Westerwick 2014).

Social comparison can affect one’s evaluation of self-worth as depicted by Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen (2011). These scholars drew from the social cognitive theories, which suggest “that these online behaviors may reflect identification with fame-seeking and competitive behaviors observed in reality television” (Stefanone et al. 2011). Entertainers and celebrities are usually photoshopped or digitally enhanced, and consumers of media may find themselves idealizing these images, which perpetuates a need for comparison. They discuss the culture of SNS, more specifically photo-sharing on SNS in which “photos do not just commemorate important events and special occasions, but record our everyday lives and social interactions,” and “personal photos are intrinsically intimate” (Stefanone et al. 2011). From photo-sharing, they found that younger females are more likely to post photos (Stefanone et al. 2011). Similarly, in an article discussing age differences, the researchers use the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST), to discuss age related difference and users’ habits on SNS (Chang, Choi, Bazarova, and Lockenhoff 2015). Additionally, they found that older adults have

different priorities concerning time limitations; as younger users, they are more likely to have a large network of friends and acquaintances; are more interested in close relationships; and do not find it as appealing to network as frequently as younger people (Chang et al. 2015). These findings can be linked to negative age stereotypes about youth, whom often get perceived as having a higher participation rate in SNS (Levy, Chung, Bedford, and Navrazhina 2013).

The depiction of sexual appeal on social networking sites has been explored by recent research in relation to a variety of topics, including its influence on body image, social comparison, and self-worth, which intersects with gender and age. The discussion around social networking sites is fairly new due to technological advances in the recent years. Consequently, research involving this area remains young and deserving of further exploration. The studies, addressing topics of sex appeal in SNS engage discussions that use similar theories such as the social cognition theory to evaluate some of the findings. The sexual appeal depicted on SNS aligns with socially constructed mantras about a body that the majority of people in our culture, including the one's who approximate the ideal, simply do not have. Images of sexual appeal depicted on SNS, such as the subreddit "AmISexy?", show no new revelation, as these images emphasize beauty standard as they have been prevalent in our society for decades. This work offers another lens to the discussion of body image on SNS and, more specifically, the depiction of sexual appeal in our society.

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[1] [hashtag: a word or phrase that usually pertains to an idea or topic that one has posted on a social networking site that has a pound sign in front of it.]



## **Data and Methods**

Reddit is a mass community also consists of many subcultures, for this reason there are terms specific to their communication, for example, the content of the “hot” tab on the subreddit. The hot tab on reddit consist of the most viewed, commented on, or rated (these often intersect) posts on the homepage itself or that particular forum. I collected my data by viewing the posts as well as threads presented. After I collected the data, I looked for reiterations of certain words or expressions related to the posts and threads that form a possible pattern on the subreddit “hot” tab. After examining reoccurring themes of certain language in the community, I was able to examine the depiction of sexual appeal in social networking sites and its relation to body image and gender.

For this project, I used an unobtrusive method of analysis, to examine how sexual appeal is depicted in the subreddit ‘AmISexy? I viewed the posts that were publicly submitted by users on the “hot” page of the subreddit. These posts consist of all self-identified individuals by sex and above the age of 18. I analyzed the images of the “hot” tab on the subreddit, the tag on the post with the image, and the thread that follows. Employing this method of research was useful in this study because it enabled observations without direct interaction with the ‘AmISexy?’ forum users. The subreddit ‘AmISexy? is dedicated to users who knowingly post their pictures and publically engage in discussions about physical appearance. The unobtrusive method of research was helpful to observe how sexual appeal is depicted on the popular social networking site Reddit.

I collected the data for this project in the months of October through December 2015. The pictures and posts sampled for this study were selected via criteria of being over the age of 18, by viewing the posts as well as threads presented. After collecting the data, I looked for reiterations of poses and angles in the pictures, as well as observing certain words, expressions and interactions related to the posts selected. Because the unobtrusive method of research employs an inductive approach, the analysis of the data involved open coding to observe emerging themes in the data.

The analysis draws from thirty-five different posts. The posts contained two to five pictures of the user, and most consisting of over twenty comments. By the time I completed collecting data, between 80-100 hundred photos were set aside for analysis, and over 400 comments were analyzed. The data was grouped into categories to refine the coding process. Initially, I explored the data through two categories, 1) pictures, and 2) posts and comments. Through these categories, I began the analysis by narrowing descriptive codes, as well as literal codes. At the end of the coding stage, three main themes emerged. These themes were refined through analytical coding. Table 1 illustrates how I organized reoccurring themes into categories during the coding process.

Table 1.

Codes	Descriptions
Physical Appearance	<u>Rapunzel</u> : length and texture of hair <u>Underwear</u> : consisted of photos of the users in their underwear <u>Thinness</u> : Western/ European beauty standards of a thin body type, nose, double eyelids
Photography Style	<u>Bright-eyed</u> : front-face shot of either person lying down or direct with

	<p>eyebrows raised. This angle intensifies the eyes, usually to enhance the size.</p> <p><u>Bikini bod- shot</u>: position in which a person poses positioning their body where one leg covers the other, the upper torso is more upright, and one arm is up on the accordin hip.</p> <p><u>Cleavage or leave it</u>: shot taken above the head or slightly tilting the camera down in order to enhance the positioning of their breasts</p>
Objectification of the body	<p><u>Let's go on a rate</u>: commenters rated the posters on a 1-10 scale</p> <p><u>She bang-able</u>: general idea of wanting to have sex with the users often commenting with “bang”</p> <p><u>Butt you're beautiful</u>: often the users would give the buttocks a rating of its own</p>

### Data Analysis

The objective of this study was to examine how sexual appeal is depicted in the the subreddit *AmISexy?*. This study examined 145 pictures throughout a total of about 35 users on the most highly rated posts on the “hot” tab of the subreddit page. The “hot” page indicates the more recent as well as the most rated posts. By analyzing these posts, I was able to examine the depiction of sexual appeal on the subreddit “AmISexy?”.

After viewing the posts and comments there three themes that emerged from the data. First, a majority of the users had European features and contain the “ideal” female standards of beauty. Second, most of the user’s pictures consisted of angled shots from either, or both, the camera and their body position to depict sexual appeal. Third, the comments of the posts often were degrading towards a particular feature, or convey the user’s attractiveness through expressing a complete objectification of the body.

“Let down your hair, send pics in your underwear ;)”

*Thin White Rapunzel in Underwear*

*AmISexy?* posts consisted mostly of females who had characteristics of European beauty standards and depicted the ideal female standards of beauty. The majority of the highly commented and voted posts were young, white females. These women had features that aligned with hegemonic beauty standards a thin nose, double eyelids, big eyes, and *repunzel-like hair*. I coded *rapunzel hair* in relation to length and texture, not necessarily in terms of color, although having blonde hair gave an advantage to female subreddit users. Many of the comments from various redditors preferred straight hair in the user's pictures to their naturally curly hair because they felt that look was sexier. There were also comments on how growing out one's hair longer could improve someone's sexiness.

In addition to shiny long hair, *thinness* was another characteristic of the women on top rated posts. I coded *thinness* in relation to the person's body type and whether the individual in the picture was thin by society's standards. Some of the qualities of these characteristics included pronounced collarbones and ribcages, the socially controversial "thigh gap"; in which the legs don't touch, and emaciated abs [provide descriptions of thinness here. Look at your data and describe the photographs for the reader]. Many of the user's showed these aspects of their body by posing in their *underwear*, including bathing suits, in which the user often cropped their face and feet out of the picture, either for identity purposes, to emphasize the particular regions of the body, or both.

"#nofilter #flawless

*Bright-eyed, Bikini bod-shot and cleavage or leave it*

The posts on *AmISexy?* consisted of photos of the users posing with their camera and or body in an angled positions to create shots that are sexually appealing. In other

words, the subreddit users both angle their camera and/or body in order to depict sexual appeal. A key point in the observation is that this angle was *bright-eyed*. The bright-eyed angle consists of a front face shot of either the person laying down and their camera is placed above their head, or the direct face in which the camera was in front of their face with eyebrows raised, often with bright lighting. In this shot the camera angles intensify the eyes, and enhancing their size. In some users, this angle helped lightening their complexion.

An additional observation is that all female pictures contained a pose in which they wore a bikini—the *bikini bod-shot*. The bikini bod-shot is not an exact reference to the person wearing a bikini, although that is where the idea comes from; this idea is related to the position that the person uses when they're in the photo. For example, the general pose consists of the person's positioning their body on the side where one leg partially covers the other, the upper torso is more upright, and one arm is up on the according hip and the other is down. This depicts an angle that distorts one's body intended to make the stomach look flatter and enhance other features like the breasts and buttocks. Sometimes, users also tilt their head back a bit to show more length of the hair down their back.

In a similar fashion to *bright-eyed*, the angle shot I coded as *cleavage or leave it*, the person places the camera above her head or slightly tilt the camera down in order to enhance the positioning of their breasts. Usually, this was accompanied with low cut shirts or dresses. Additionally, this angle made the person's head appear bigger than the body, creating an illusion of the person being thinner than their actual body size. "The most booty-ful girls in the world."

*Let's go on a "rate", "She bang"-able, butt you're beautiful, , and fleek*

The posts consisted of comments that degraded a certain part of the user's body or conveyed desire to engage in sexual activity with the users. Generally, these feelings were communicated via vulgar expressions such as "wanting to bang" the user when they were attractive or sexy. This degradation often occurred on the female posts, as the males did not receive as many votes or comments as females (men also had the least amount of posts). *Let's go on a "rate"* was coded as the tool that most redditors used and also what a majority of the posters wanted to be judged by. The scale goes from 1-10 in which 1 is the least sexy and 10 is the sexiest. The average number of the top rated posts came around 7 to 9. Commenters would often rate things separately, for example the face in the post would get one rating, and the body would get another. This means that users can equal in both categories or one and not the other.

*"She bang"-able* was coded for the plethora of "would bang" comments observed in the thread of every top rated female user's post. Often, the commenters would use the term to signify how sexy the person was, and that if the commenter expressed wanting to have sex with the user, then the user was sexy. This comment usually followed a rating of the person, often in the higher region, but sometimes lower, also signifying that the user was not sexy, but the person would still have sex with them.

Similarly, comments were made over specific areas of the user's body, often regarding the buttocks, which I coded as *butt you're beautiful*. *Butt your beautiful* often had redditors that would specifically comment on the person's bottom, giving it a rating itself, making it so that this part of the person's body would determine the person's

(majority females) sexiness. Much of the comments regarding the backside of the body were sexually explicit often degrading the user as an object for pleasure.

The redditors would also comment on eyebrows, which I coded as the slang term *fleek*. The *fleek* was shown in most of the threads in which the users would judge the person's eyebrow maintenance; if they were well plucked or not, also contributed to the person's level sexiness. The details of what people found sexy and not sexy varied thought comments, but the eyebrows seemed to be a constant indicator for sex appeal.

## **Conclusions**

This project examined how sexual appeal is depicted on the subreddit site 'AmISexy?'. The content analysis method was used to observe of 20 different posts ranging from 80 to 100 pictures and over 400 comments. Three overarching themes emerged in the analysis of the pictures and the comments on the site. First, findings reveal that top rated users on the "AmISexy?" subreddit often were white with straight and smooth long hair. These characteristics are a part of the European beauty standards in which light complexion, straight hair, thin nose, big eyes, and thin bodies are seen as the ideal female beauty standard. Second, this study found that camera angles and body positions used to appear sexier. The body position used in the bikini bod shot that presented a thinner body while enhancing other features, breasts and the butt while also making the hair appear longer by the tilting back one's head. Similarly, the bright-eyed angle was used, making the eyes appear bigger in many of the above camera pictures as well as the front facing pictures. Third, comments by other users often were aim to objectify a specific part of someone's body. These expressions included comments like "would bang" and in cases the commenters would rate certain body parts, often

signifying that specific physical characteristic was more important than the person as a whole.

The issue of European beauty standards has had a history in our society and many others. The implementation of these beauty standards is represented in the photos which consist of mostly young females who want to put themselves on a site to be rated, and are viewed as sexy only if they fit into these exclusive features. The fact that most of the top rated posts were those of white, thin, European haired females was not surprising but showed how stagnant and exclusive our beauty standards are.

We also see the issue of body image when analyzing the photos of these individuals. These ideas are dangerous because they perpetuate a very narrow view of beauty, and it communicates to the users of the forum that the European standards of beauty are the ideal sexy. These similarities signify an array of societal dilemmas in our ideas of beauty as well as the support of rigid gender roles. The rigid gender roles are based on the sample, which consist almost entirely of females, and two, the comments.

Finally, we see the reflection of what is taught in our society by the comments of these users on the subreddit, mostly consisting of young males. Although anonymity can make you bold, the patterns in the comments are staggering and portray a complication in which we often objectify women. In view of this, degrading comments and seeking validation from strangers through a rating system is a norm.



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