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Emiko Taniguchi

Hye E. Lee

Xiaowen Guan

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

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Young Women's Sex Talk Online: Roles of Anonymity, Social Closeness, and Cultural Background on Perceived Appropriateness and Behavioral Intention

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Emiko Taniguchi¹, Hye Eun Lee² , and Xiaowen Guan³

Abstract

In this study, we examined the roles of anonymity and social closeness in predicting young women's perceptions of "sex talk" (i.e., communication about sexual interests, enjoyment, and experiences) and intentions to post such content in cyberspace. We also examined cultural differences among Asian, Latina, and European Americans. A total of 466 undergraduate women from the three cultural groups participated in the online experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to either a low anonymity condition (i.e., Facebook) or a high anonymity condition (i.e., an anonymous online forum) where they were exposed to identical sex talk stimuli. The main findings showed that greater anonymity increased both the level of perceived appropriateness of sex talk posted by other female users and participants' intentions to post sex talk online themselves. Compared to European American women, Asian and Latina Americans reported greater intentions to post sex talk online and perceived other female users' sex talk posts as more appropriate. The results of this study prompt educators and practitioners to help young women strategically manage their impressions of sex talk online while being sensitive to women's cultural backgrounds. They also suggest the need for further support from practitioners, educators, and parents to construct safe spaces for young women to engage open conversations about sexual matters in the digital space.

Keywords

cross-cultural communication, computer-mediated communication, experiment, online anonymity, sex talk

Sex remains one of the most controversial and least discussed topics among women (Horenstein & Downey, 2003; Montemurro et al., 2015). We define communication about sexual interests, enjoyment, and experiences as "sex talk." Because of the stigma often associated with sex talk (Levin et al., 2012; Trinh, 2016), women have expressed hesitancy in talking about sexual matters openly and freely (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Muise, 2011). Cyberspace may be one of the few "safe places" that allows women to engage in sex talk and explore their sexuality (Muise, 2011, p. 411). Even though existing research reports that women engage in sex talk online (Pedersen, 2014), we do not know much about how other women perceive such posts. Understanding these perceptions is important because they are linked to various negative outcomes ranging from hindering relationship development to lowering one's hiring potential (Duffy & Chan, 2019; McEwan & Flood, 2018; Orben & Dunbar, 2017; Pennington, 2020).

This study sought to understand three potential predictors of women's perceptions and behaviors of sex talk online: level of anonymity, type of cultural background, and degree of social closeness. First, we examined whether an online

platform that afforded higher anonymity encouraged women to both engage in sex talk themselves and evaluate other women's sex talk more positively than those with lower anonymity. Second, we considered that women's cultural backgrounds could impact their perceptions and intentions because different cultures have dissimilar attitudes toward sex talk. The current study focused on young women from three cultural groups in the United States (U.S.): Latina, Asian, and European Americans. European Americans have been the leading racial and ethnic group in internet use for the

¹ Department of Communicology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Honolulu, HI, USA

² School of Communication and Media, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea

³ Department of Emerging Media, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Hye Eun Lee, School of Communication and Media, Ewha Womans University, #403 Ewha-POSCO, 52 Ewhayeodae-gil, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 03760, South Korea.

Email: hyeeunlee77@ewha.ac.kr

last two decades (Pew Research Center, 2019). Latin Americans are the largest racial and ethnic minority in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Yet, research on sexual expression and disclosure among these minority populations is limited. Finally, we investigated whether women's perceived appropriateness of the sex talk post would vary as a function of how socially close they were to the person who posted the sex talk (e.g., friend vs. acquaintance). This study focused on women-to-women sex talk online due to the unique same-sex dynamic among women.

Sex Talk Online

The internet is characterized as easily accessible, confidential, and interactive (Fidler, 1997), and nine of 10 adults in the U.S. use the internet (Pew Research Center, 2019). Virtual space allows for anonymity—a state where a person is not identifiable (Marx, 1999). As such, virtual space is often considered superior to face-to-face communication when sharing sensitive information (e.g., Andalibi et al., 2016). As a result, sex talk is particularly prevalent on the internet, covering topics ranging from sex education, sexual health, and sexual identity validation to exploration of sexual pleasures (e.g., Chiou, 2006; Kummervold et al., 2002; Pedersen, 2014; Salter, 2016; Yeo & Chu, 2017).

Although it is true that the internet, due to its anonymity, may offer women a safer space to post sex talk online, it can also be a double-edged sword. When information cannot be associated with a person's identity, people tend to be more candid about the information they share and say things that they would not say offline. This is known as the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). On one hand, empirical research has repeatedly shown that a social networking service enhances information sharing, advice seeking, and social validation on topics such as sexual health, sexual desire, and sexual identity (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015; Simon & Daneback, 2013; Yeo & Chu, 2017). On the other hand, the online disinhibition effect is also related to increased cyberbullying, hostility, and verbal attacks intended to offend an individual or a group (Joinson, 1998, 2001).

Additionally, not all online platforms have the same levels of anonymity, which can range from being completely anonymous to lacking anonymity altogether. According to social information processing theory (Walther, 1992), users of online communication employ whatever information is available in the environment to form impressions about other users despite the absence of nonverbal cues that are usually available in face-to-face interactions. One such piece of information young women use in evaluating a sex talk post may be the degree of anonymity afforded by the platform on which the sex talk is posted. Before delineating the role of anonymity on perceived appropriateness, this article first provides an

explanation of gendered sexual norms, which often run counter to women's expression of sexual matters.

Perceived Appropriateness and Intention

Women's expressions of sexual interests and enjoyment are often complicated by traditional gendered sexual norms (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Montemurro et al., 2015). Traditional gendered sexual norms often perpetuate power inequalities between men and women by permitting men to prioritize their own sexual needs and desires while pressuring women to depreciate theirs (see Kim et al., 2007, for the concept of heterosexual script). Such norms dictate that men should be active and dominant whereas women should be passive and subordinate during sexual encounters (Knight et al., 2012; Montemurro et al., 2015; Muise, 2011). Traditional gendered sexual norms are less accepting of women's active exploration of their sexual desires and pleasures (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Trinh, 2016). Even women themselves follow these norms in evaluating other women (Trinh, 2016; Trinh & Choukas-Bradley, 2018). For instance, Baumeister and Twenge (2002) found that women tended to evaluate other women more harshly for their promiscuity than did men. Perhaps due to such gendered sexual norms, women often report greater discomfort and challenges than men do when talking about sex and sexual behaviors (Montemurro et al., 2015).

Despite the general stigma toward women's engaging in sex talk, college women report having relatively open and frequent discussions about sex with their peers, especially same-sex peers (Lefkowitz et al., 2004; Trinh & Ward, 2016). The messages college women receive from their peers that encourage sexual positivity (e.g., "sex is fun") and sexual exploration, however, are often nuanced by simultaneously including sexual restriction (e.g., the importance of being or appearing to be "a good girl"; Trinh, 2016). Yet, such a moral dilemma is almost non-existent among their male counterparts. Given the risks of being negatively judged by others for sharing their sexual interests and enjoyment, it is not surprising that young women may turn to cyberspace (e.g., Muise, 2011). Evidence shows that women do engage in discussions of sexual matters online (Pedersen, 2014), but little is known about how women perceive such sex talk online. Based on the social information processing theory (Walther, 1992), we argue that a woman's evaluation of the appropriateness of sex talk posted by another woman may be a function of the degree of anonymity the platform affords.

The current study examined two specific forms of online media with varying degrees of anonymity: an anonymous online forum (i.e., high anonymity) and Facebook (i.e., low anonymity). It was expected that women would perceive sex talk posted on Facebook as less appropriate than sex talk posted on an anonymous forum. Facebook requires users to register under their real names. As a result, viewers may perceive that posting sex talk on Facebook using a

(presumably) real name as too risky for the person who posted it, because other users can easily identify the person. Additionally, sex talk posts on Facebook may also be viewed as inappropriate because they would violate the established social norm on Facebook: only sharing mundane and less offensive information (e.g., pets, food) that is suitable for a broad audience (e.g., close friends, friends of friends, co-workers, acquaintances, or relatives; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Tong & Walther, 2011). In contrast, sex talk on an anonymous website under a pseudonym may be perceived as less harshly because people likely expect individuals to turn to anonymous platforms to disclose intimate and potentially stigmatizing information. In fact, Bazarova (2012) showed that instances of intimate self-disclosure on Facebook using public settings (i.e., low anonymity) were judged as less appropriate than those in private settings (i.e., high anonymity). Therefore, we created the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Sex talk posts on an anonymous online forum would be perceived as more appropriate than those on Facebook.

By the same token, we also assumed that the level of anonymity may also impact women's own intentions to post sex talk online. The online disinhibition effect may embolden individuals to disclose personal information online that can be controversial or stigmatizing (e.g., abortion) when greater anonymity is ensured (Wu & Atkin, 2018). Thus, posting sex talk on an anonymous website using a pseudonym might be less threatening for women because their posts cannot be easily traced to their offline identities, reducing the likelihood of being shamed or stigmatized. In contrast, women might be hesitant to post sexual content on Facebook because Facebook "friends" tend to be people users already know offline rather than strangers (Joinson, 2008). What a woman posts on Facebook can be easily tracked back to her offline identity by actual individuals in her existing offline social network, potentially causing the woman to become the target of stigmatization. In fact, Chiou (2006) found that adolescents reported greater intent to disclose sexual information online when greater anonymity was involved (e.g., using a nickname), compared to when little anonymity was ensured (e.g., using a picture or a webcam). Taken together, we expected that greater anonymity would encourage women to post sex talk. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Women would show greater intention to post sex talk on an anonymous online forum than on Facebook.

Cultural Differences in Attitudes Toward Sex Talk

Cultural differences in individuals' sexual attitudes can be understood based on the degree to which the cultures and individuals therein value interdependence versus

independence. European Americans and those from other individualistic societies tend to prioritize individual independence, valuing self-expression, autonomy, and uniqueness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). By extension, sexuality in an individualistic culture often values personal choice, pleasure, and romantic love (Dion & Dion, 1993; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996; Manago et al., 2015), which provide the foundation for European American women to be active and positive about sex talk. Individuals from Asian, Latin American, and other collectivistic cultures, however, tend to value interdependence through an emphasis on familial and interpersonal connectedness, obligations, and responsibilities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Traditionally in these cultures, sexuality has been framed in terms of procreation and family honor (Manago et al., 2014, 2015).

The term "Asian American" encompasses Americans with cultural heritages stemming from East Asia (e.g., China, Korea, Japan), South Asia (e.g., India), and Southeast Asia (e.g., the Philippines, Vietnam). Even though Asian American refers to a diverse group of people with varying histories, cultures, and languages, these groups share a similar perspective on sexuality in which the expression of sexuality outside of marriage is considered highly inappropriate (Okazaki, 2002). Because East Asians from China (22.42%), Korea (8.43%), and Japan (6.54%), as well as Indians (19.65%) and Filipinos (18.02%), account for the majority (75%) of Asian Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), our discussion focuses on these specific Asian American cultural groups.

Many East Asian cultures are heavily influenced by Confucianism, which has foregrounded the suppression of passionate love and considers anything sexual as taboo (Higgins et al., 2002). East Asians are less likely than Westerners to disclose sensitive information about the self (Kito, 2005; Schug et al., 2010), including sexual matters (Katz, 2002). Their low levels of self-disclosure and devaluation of expressiveness may be explained by their strong concerns about "face" (Zane & Yeh, 2002). Face refers to the positive image they want others to have of them (Ting-Toomey, 1988). For East Asians, the consequence of losing face is severer as it can bring shame not only to individuals but also to their families and even their communities (Futa et al., 2001; Ho, 1976; Shon & Ja, 1982).

Filipino and Indian Americans' sexual attitudes are also heavily influenced by religion. Filipino culture is considerably influenced by Catholicism, which emphasizes women's sexual purity and condemns premarital sex (Okazaki, 2002). *Marianismo*, which refers to a cultural expectation that women are to be like the Virgin Mary (Ahrens et al., 2010), is viewed as a fundamental value among many Filipino Americans (Espiritu, 2001; Nadal, 2011). For Indian Americans, sexuality per se is not a taboo topic in traditional Hindu culture, but it is expected to be discussed only within the context of marriage (Gupta, 1994). Furthermore, women's chastity and premarital virginity are highly emphasized, and women's sexual behavior is often closely controlled and monitored (Mahalingam, 2007).

Even though sexual attitudes in Asian cultures stem from different religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., Confucianism, Catholicism, Hinduism), they are similar in terms of conservatism (Manago et al., 2015; Okazaki, 2002). Asian American women, especially, are shy and modest when it comes to communicating about sexual matters (Katz, 2002). Based on the cultural emphasis on sexual conservatism, we postulated that Asian American women would be unlikely to perceive others' sex talk as appropriate and highly hesitant to engage in sex talk online. Therefore, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Asian American women would perceive sex talk posts as less appropriate (H3a) and express less intent to post sex talk online (H3b) than do European American women.

Even though Latin American societies greatly differ from Asian societies culturally and historically, they share commonalities in terms of conservative attitudes toward sex. The term "Latin American" encompasses diverse groups of Americans with origin in countries of Latin America, including Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, most of which endorse Catholicism. As such, Latin American cultures, like the Filipino culture, tend to emphasize marianismo and the importance of chastity before marriage for women while approving the sexual exploration of men (Comas-Díaz, 1987; González-López, 2003). Although Latin American parents in the U.S. talk about sex-related topics with their children (Miller et al., 1998), such talk often centers on culturally prescribed gender roles, highlighting the importance of premarital virginity for women (Ahrens et al., 2010; Manago et al., 2015). Latina women are discouraged from verbalizing their feelings and thoughts about sex: A "good" Latina should not enjoy sex, and talking about sex can suggest sexual knowledge and enjoyment (Gil & Vazquez, 2014). Latin American college students reported more conservative sexual attitudes than their non-Latin counterparts (Eisenman & Dantzker, 2006). At the same time, conflicting evidence exists regarding Latina Americans' sexual attitudes. Some reported that there were no substantial differences in reports of casual sexual relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2009) and sexual attitudes (Ahrold & Meston, 2010) between Latin and European Americans. Manago et al. (2015) found that the messages Latin American college students received from their peers often promoted sex for pleasure outside of commitment, which corresponded to more individualistic sexual attitudes. Because there was mixed evidence regarding Latina Americans' levels of sexual conservatism, we asked the following research question:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How would Latina American women differ from European and Asian American women in terms of perceived appropriateness of a sex talk post (RQ1a) and the intention to post sex talk online (RQ1b)?

Social Closeness and Perception of Sex Talk Posts

Finally, in this study, we examined whether the social closeness between the discloser (i.e., a person who posted sex talk online) and the viewer played a role in the viewer's perceived appropriateness of the sex talk post. Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) posits that both the breadth and depth of self-disclosure increase as relationships develop. Thus, individuals would perceive sex talk as more appropriate when disclosed by those who are socially close (i.e., close friends) than by those who are socially distant (i.e., acquaintances). However, although this principle applies to face-to-face settings, it might not apply to online environments. Unlike face-to-face situations, the default communication on social media sites and anonymous online forums is one-to-many. Information disclosed on an anonymous online forum is accessible to many users who may or may not be friends of the discloser. The same is true for Facebook unless the discloser's account is set to be accessible only to friends. Sex talk posted on Facebook will be accessible to "Facebook friends" (i.e., all individuals with whom the user is connected through Facebook), ranging from socially close others (e.g., close friends) to socially distant others (e.g., neighbors, co-workers, and friends of friends). Regardless of whether the discloser is the viewer's friend, releasing sexual information on Facebook implies that the information will likely be seen by viewers who are socially distant from the discloser.

It is not clear whether social closeness with the discloser matters to individuals when they evaluate the appropriateness of a sex talk post. On the one hand, closeness may still matter in online platforms, contributing to more favorable perceptions toward sex talk posts from intimates than from strangers. On the other hand, the one-to-many format in the online platforms may "cancel out" such benefits of social closeness in facilitating more favorable perceptions. This issue comes down to a theoretical question of whether the one-to-many factor outweighs social closeness in the judgment of social appropriateness. Examining this issue will help identify key factors contributing to the judgment of appropriateness in cyberspace. Because of the lack of literature and competing arguments, we asked the following research question:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How would the social closeness between viewers and the discloser impact the viewers' perceptions of the appropriateness of an online sex talk post?

Method

Participants

Female participants ($N = 466$; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.85$, $SD = 2.19$, range = 18–36) were recruited from various communication classes at two large universities in the Pacific and Southwestern U.S.

Approximately 58% of participants ($n = 270$) identified as European American, while 24.5% ($n = 114$) identified as Asian American, and 17.6% ($n = 82$) as Latina American. Those who identified as other than European, Asian, or Latina American were excluded from further analyses. All participants were U.S. citizens, and no further demographic questions were asked. Participants received extra course credit for their participation.

Procedure

Participants were instructed to log into a website where they could participate in the study on their own. After they read and signed a consent form and completed a demographic questionnaire, participants were exposed to a web page involving sex talk (see Stimulus Materials section). They were then asked to complete a series of questions (see Measures section) that took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Stimulus Materials

The stimuli were mock-up web pages created to reflect a different degree of anonymity (low vs. high). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two stimuli. For the low anonymity condition, a screenshot of a Facebook profile page of a target with an ostensibly real name (“Sophia Taylor”) was used (see Figure 1). A screenshot of an anonymous online forum web page (“womenshealth.com”) that showed a target with her pseudonym (“Pinkmoon”) was used for the high anonymity condition (see Figure 2). The low anonymity condition ($n = 301$; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.71$, $SD = 1.89$) included 185 European Americans, 47 Latina Americans, and 69 Asian Americans. The high anonymity condition ($n = 165$; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.10$, $SD = 2.64$) included 85 European Americans, 35 Latina Americans, and 45 Asian Americans. Due to the survey system restriction at that time, we had a larger sample for the low anonymity condition than for the high anonymity condition. In order to eliminate confounding caused by unequal sample sizes, Type III sum of squares was used for the ANOVAs (Maxwell et al., 2017). There was no significant age difference between the low anonymous condition ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.71$, $SD = 1.89$) and the high anonymous condition ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.10$, $SD = 2.64$), $t(456) = -1.84$, $p = .07$.

Both conditions used the same profile picture of a kitten. Aside from the difference in website banner, the only difference between the two conditions was the name of the target profile owner, who was ostensibly female. Both conditions included two sex talk posts shared by the profile owner. In the first post, the profile owner wrote, “Have you guys tried these places? I’ll try and let you know what I liked the most.” The message was followed by a screenshot of a *Cosmopolitan* web page titled “8 New Places to Have Great Sex,” which included eight places to have sex (e.g., “In a tent,” “In the woods”) with some intimate images of a man and woman. The second post by the profile owner read, “Check this out!

This info helped me a lot!” followed by a screenshot of a *wikiHow* web page entitled “How to French Kiss.” The screenshot depicted five steps of a French kiss (e.g., “angle your face,” “go slow and explore with your tongue”) with some graphic images in order to explain the steps.

Manipulation checks. Additional data ($n = 33$) were collected from students at a large university in the Pacific U.S. to test if two stimuli were perceived as reflecting different degrees of anonymity than was intended. Ten items assessed perceived anonymity using a 5-point ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$, $5 = \text{strongly agree}$) Likert-type scale. These items measured the degree to which participants thought they could identify the profile owner’s characteristics such as name, age, and physical appearance. Example items included “I can find who posted the posts I just saw” (reverse-coded) and “People cannot identify who the profile owner (“Sophia Taylor”) is.” The reliability coefficient (i.e., Cronbach’s α) was .71. As expected, participants in the anonymous online forum condition reported perceiving a significantly higher level of anonymity ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.46$) than those in the Facebook condition ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.63$), $t(31) = -3.59$, $p < .001$.

Measures

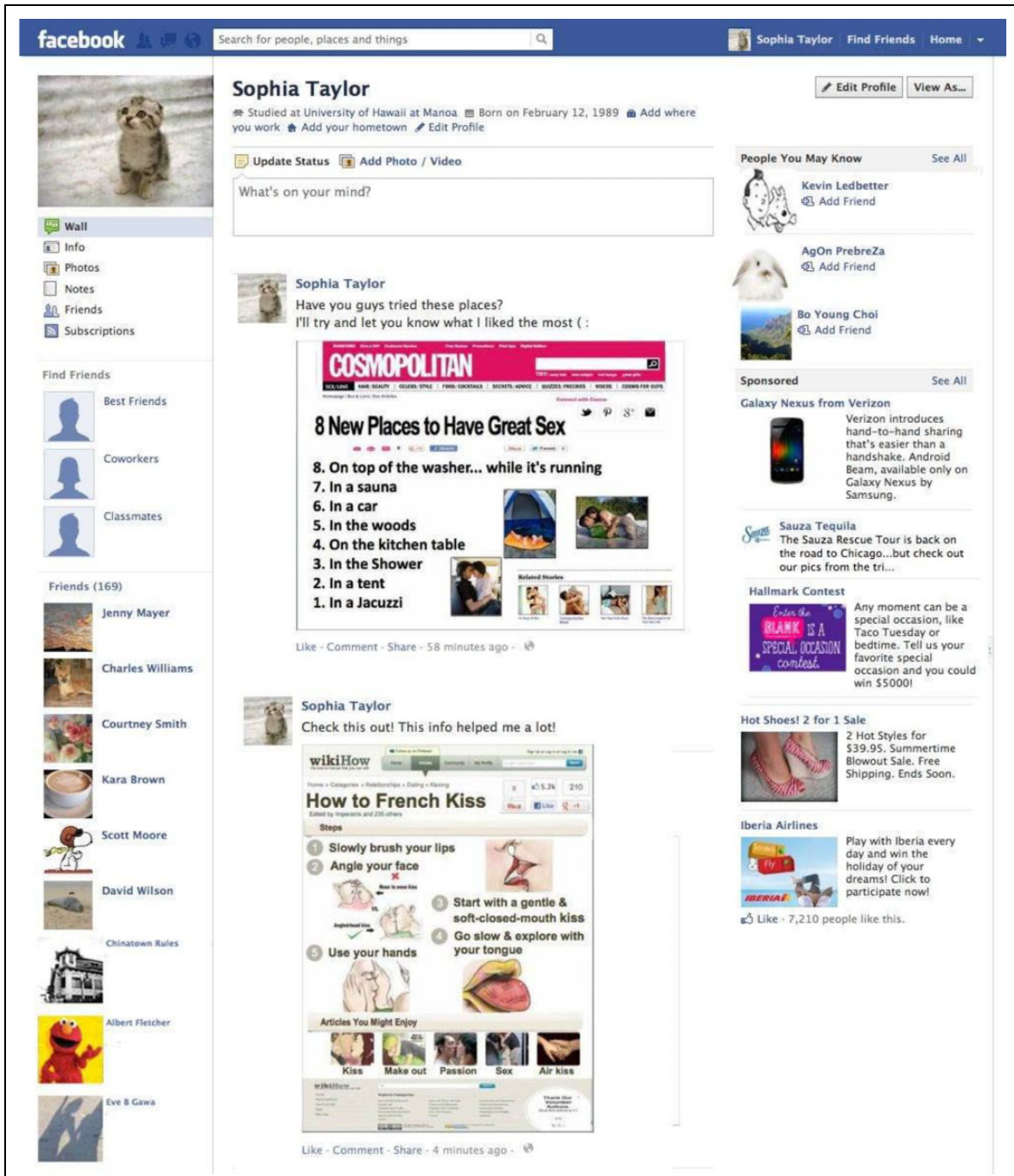
For all measures except the demographic questions, participants indicated their responses using 5-point Likert-type scales ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$, $5 = \text{strongly agree}$).

Perceived appropriateness. The perceived appropriateness of the sex talk posts was measured by four items (e.g., “This kind of sex talk posted by [Sophia/Pinkmoon] is generally appropriate.”) that were modified from Park et al. (2005). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) indicated that all four items loaded onto one factor (eigenvalue = 2.29, explaining 57.26% of the variance; individual factor loading ranged from .75 to .79). The four items were averaged to create a single score. Cronbach’s α was .80 across all conditions.

Intention to post sex talk online. Four items (e.g., “I am willing to post sex related topics and messages on Facebook,” “I intend to post sexual messages and topics on Facebook”) assessed participants’ intentions to post sex talk on Facebook. These items were modified from Park et al. (2005). “Facebook” was replaced by “anonymous online forums” for the anonymous condition. An EFA yielded a single factor both for Facebook (eigenvalue = 2.78, explaining 69.61% of the variance; individual factor loading ranged from .78 to .88) and online forums (eigenvalue = 2.52, explaining 63.07% of the variance; individual factor loading ranged from .71 to .85). The scale was constructed by averaging the items. Cronbach’s α was .74 for Facebook and .72 for anonymous online forums.

Perceived appropriateness as a function of social closeness. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement (modified from Park et al., 2005) “I think the sex talk post I just saw is appropriate if the discloser was a” one of the following four individuals with a varying degree

Figure 1. A stimulus material for the Facebook condition (low anonymity).



of social closeness: “close friend,” “casual friend,” “acquaintance,” and “stranger.”

Results

Perceived Appropriateness of Sex Talk

A 2 (stimulus) × 3 (culture) ANOVA predicting perceived appropriateness of sex talk was conducted to address H1,

RQ1a, and H3a. H1 predicted that sex talk posts on an anonymous online forum would be perceived as more appropriate than those posted on Facebook. We found a significant main effect of stimuli on perceived appropriateness, $F(1, 458) = 173.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .28$. Participants in the anonymous forum condition ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.74$) reported greater perceived appropriateness than those in the Facebook condition ($M = 1.76, SD = 0.62$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Figure 2. A stimulus material for the anonymous online forum condition (high anonymity).

The screenshot displays a forum page on Womens-Health.com. At the top, there are navigation tabs for various categories: BEAUTY & STYLE, FITNESS & NUTRITION, FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS, SEX & SEXUAL HEALTH, PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH, and GIRL TALK. Below the navigation is a header with the site logo and several advertisements. A user profile bar for 'Pinkmoon' is visible, showing 'Welcome, Pinkmoon', 'Notifications', 'My Profile', and 'Log Out'. The forum post itself is titled 'How do we keep society civil without incarcerating too many people?' and is from a user named 'Pinkmoon', a Silver Contributor with 100+ posts. The post content includes a link to a Cosmopolitan article titled '8 New Places to Have Great Sex' and a link to a wikiHow article titled 'How to French Kiss'. The forum interface also shows a search bar, a 'Reply to Thread' button, and a 'Like' button.

RQ1a asked if Latina Americans differed from European and Asian American women in their perceived appropriateness of sex talk posted by another female user, and H3a hypothesized that Asian American women would perceive sex talk as less appropriate than European American women. There was a significant main effect of culture, $F(2, 458) = 5.57, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc analyses using

LSD's test at $p < .05$ indicated that the perceived appropriateness reported by European American women ($M = 1.98, SD = 0.79$) was significantly lower than that of Latina American ($M = 2.35, SD = 0.79$) and Asian American women ($M = 2.24, SD = 0.82$). Therefore, H3a was not supported. Latina and Asian Americans did not differ in perceived appropriateness. There was a non-significant

interaction effect between the condition and culture, $F(2, 458) = 0.58, p = .51, \eta^2 = .00$.

Intention to Post Sex Talk

We conducted a 2 (stimulus) \times 3 (culture) ANOVA predicting intention to post sex talk to address H2, RQ1b, and H3b. H2 predicted that women would report greater intention to post sex talk on an anonymous online forum than on Facebook. We found a significant main effect of stimuli, $F(1, 458) = 8.61, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$. Participants in the anonymous forum condition ($M = 1.62, SD = 0.66$) reported greater intention to post sex talk online than did participants in the Facebook condition ($M = 1.40, SD = 0.56$). Therefore, H2 was supported. Additionally, one-sample t -test showed that the reported intention to post sex talk was significantly lower than the mid-point (i.e., three in 5-point scales) both in the anonymous forum condition, $t(164) = -426.85, p < .001$, and the Facebook condition, $t(298) = -49.66, p < .001$. This finding suggests that participants in both conditions reported low intention to post sex talk online.

RQ1b asked whether Latina Americans would differ from European and Asian American women in intention to post sex talk online, and H3b hypothesized that Asian American women would show lower intentions to post sex talk than would European American women. A significant main effect of culture was found, $F(2, 458) = 3.81, p = .023, \eta^2 = .02$. A post hoc comparison using LSD's test at $p < .05$ showed that Asian ($M = 1.58, SD = 0.72$) and Latina Americans ($M = 1.57, SD = 0.63$) reported significantly greater intentions than European American women ($M = 1.40, SD = 0.54$), whereas reported intention did not significantly differ between Asian and Latina Americans. Therefore, H3b was not supported. A non-significant interaction effect between the condition and culture was found, $F(2, 458) = 0.72, p = .49, \eta^2 = .00$.

Perceived Appropriateness as a Function of Social Closeness

RQ2 asked if social closeness between viewers and the discloser who posted sex talk online would influence women's perceptions of appropriateness of the sex talk posts. A 2 (stimulus) \times 3 (culture) \times 4 (social closeness) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the social closeness variable was conducted. There was a significant main effect of social closeness, $F(3, 1350) = 134.17, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$. Post hoc analyses using LSD's test at $p < .05$ revealed that sex talk posted by a close friend ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.75$) was perceived significantly more appropriate, followed by a casual friend ($M = 2.15, SD = 1.07$), an acquaintance ($M = 1.87, SD = 0.98$), and a stranger ($M = 1.77, SD = 1.07$).

Furthermore, a significant interaction effect between stimulus and social closeness was found, $F(3, 1350) = 8.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$. Descriptive statistics regarding this

interaction effect are available in Table 1, and the nature of the interaction effect is depicted in Figure 3. For both conditions, the closer the relationship, the higher the perceived appropriateness. However, the differences in perceived appropriateness among these four levels of social closeness were less pronounced in the Facebook condition than in the anonymous online condition. This suggests that the perceived appropriateness of the sex talk post was dependent on the level of social closeness to a greater degree for the anonymous forum condition than for the Facebook condition. The three-way interaction effect among the condition, culture, and social closeness was not significant, $F(6, 458) = 0.53, p = .79, \eta^2 = .00$. This null result meant that participants' cultural backgrounds did not affect how social closeness and the anonymity condition were associated.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine how levels of anonymity and cultural background contribute to young women's perceptions of sexual self-disclosure and behavioral intentions to post sexual information online. Furthermore, the study examined whether the notion that intimate disclosure was considered more appropriate among socially close others—one of the principles of social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973)—also applied to online contexts.

The Role of Anonymity on Perceived Appropriateness and Intention

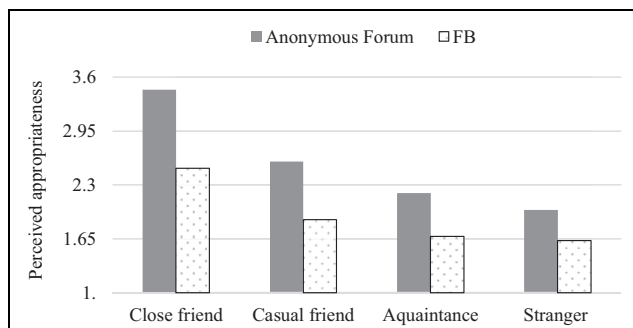
Consistent with social information processing theory (Walther, 1992), the current study showed that participants differently perceived the appropriateness of the sex talk allegedly posted by another female user. Even though the content of the information in the sex talk posts was identical across the two conditions, the level of anonymity influenced the perceived level of appropriateness of the sex talk. Young women's perceived appropriateness of another female user's sex talk was higher in the high anonymity condition than in the low anonymity condition. This finding may be reflective of young women's beliefs that a woman should not express her sexual interests and experiences online when she can be easily identified.

Young women in this study reported lower intentions to post sex talk in the low anonymity condition than in the high anonymity condition. We speculate that this is because young women feel more comfortable disclosing highly personal information when greater anonymity is ensured. The current findings corroborate previous studies that have reported greater self-disclosure under anonymous online conditions (e.g., Jiang et al., 2013; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). The disclosure pattern observed in this study—less restraint in sharing information in cyberspace that allows for greater anonymity—is consistent with online disinhibition phenomena (Suler, 2004). Further, the current finding about

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Appropriateness.

Social Closeness	Condition	Perceived Appropriateness M (SD)	One-Sample t-Test t (df)
Close friend	Facebook	2.50 (1.36)	-6.14 (297)
	Anonymous	3.45 (1.10)	5.16 (163)
	Total	2.84 (1.35)	
Casual friend	Facebook	1.88 (1.02)	-18.81 (294)
	Anonymous	2.58 (1.00)	-5.33 (162)
	Total	2.13 (1.07)	
Acquaintance	Facebook	1.68 (0.94)	-24.38 (297)
	Anonymous	2.20 (0.98)	-10.41 (163)
	Total	1.87 (0.98)	
Stranger	Facebook	1.63 (1.00)	-23.58 (295)
	Anonymous	2.00 (1.16)	-10.89 (163)
	Total	1.77 (1.07)	

Note. One-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between the mid-point of the scale (i.e., three in 5-point scales) and perceived appropriateness in each condition. Results for all one-sample t-tests were significant ($p < .001$). Perceived appropriateness was significantly lower than the scale mid-point across all the four levels of social closeness in both conditions, except for the close friends in the anonymous condition.

Figure 3. Interaction between social closeness and condition on perceived appropriateness.

Facebook might also be explained by the function Facebook serves today. Facebook is no longer considered a simple platform to share random information and self-disclose mindlessly. Rather, it is seen as a platform for self-enhancement to project a positive image strategically (Vogel & Rose, 2016). Participants might have viewed Facebook as an inappropriate place to post sex talk because such sensitive information can overshadow other qualities of the person posting it.

It is important to note that, in general, our participants in both conditions expressed low levels of intention to post sex talk (i.e., 1.40–1.62 in a 5-point scale). This finding may be because young women are not accepting of online discussions of sexual matters. Even though such potential cannot be completely denied, the low level of intention to post sex talk could be simply because young women did not feel the need to post sex talk on the platforms used in this study. Young women may prefer to engage in sex talk with close others in person or via other online platforms such as Snapchat, where

information is only available for a short period of time, or WhatsApp, where information is communicated among highly selected group member(s). Future research examining sex talk on these different online platforms is warranted because we speculate that online platforms play a moderating role in the relationship between anonymity and sexual self-disclosure, and this potential deserves further examination in the future. In fact, studies found that in online contexts such as blogs and YouTube, individuals disclosed more personal information when identifying information was made available to the public (Misoch, 2015; Qian & Scott, 2007).

Another key finding of this study is that the perceived appropriateness of sex talk varied as a function of social closeness between the viewer and the discloser: The closer viewers were to the discloser, the more appropriate they perceived the sex talk post to be. Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) suggests that disclosing personal information at the wrong time (e.g., during a first encounter) may be evaluated negatively. The current study also shows that this traditional link between relational closeness and the perceived appropriateness of intimate self-disclosure in dyadic contexts still holds for communication in one-to-many online settings. Intriguingly, sex talk posted by a socially close user was perceived as more appropriate than that posted by a socially distant one, even though the post was visible to other viewers who might have been strangers.

We also found that the impact of social closeness on perceived appropriateness was dependent on the condition: Social closeness influenced perceived appropriateness to a greater degree in the anonymous condition compared to the Facebook condition. In other words, how close a discloser was to the viewer seemed to play a more important role in influencing these viewers' perceived appropriateness of the sex talk post when higher (versus lower) anonymity was involved. Because viewers in the anonymous forum were

given little to no information about the discloser's identity, the degree of social closeness between the viewers and the discloser might have carried more weight in their judgments. In contrast, if viewers in the Facebook condition already had access to certain key pieces of information about the discloser's identity (e.g., an allegedly real name), then the degree of social closeness may have carried less weight.

The Role of Culture on Perceived Appropriateness and Intention

The current study revealed differences among three cultural groups in terms of the perceived appropriateness of sex talk and intention to post sex talk. Unexpectedly, compared to European Americans, Asian and Latina American women reported (a) perceiving other women's sex talk posts as more appropriate and (b) greater intentions to post sex talk. Asian Americans have been considered one of the most sexually conservative racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., and sexual communication is often seen as taboo at home for Asian American women (Kim & Ward, 2007). This unexpected finding may be explained by young Asian American women reacting to parents who emphasize conservative sexual values: They view sex talk outside of the home, especially in cyberspace, as an alternative to parental restrictions of sex talk at home. Due to the anonymity afforded by online settings in this study, these women might have felt less constrained, as they did not have to worry about being negatively evaluated by others.

The same logic may apply to Latina American women. Even though the relevant literature is inconclusive, Latina women have been traditionally considered sexually conservative (e.g., Eisenman & Dantzker, 2006; Manago et al., 2015). Latina Americans might fear that if they talk about sexual desires and pleasures openly, then they are not only seen as bad women but also as bad representations of their families (e.g., Niemann, 2004). Latina American women, like Asian American women, may resort to cyberspace to compensate for the shortage of opportunities for talking about sexual matters.

We also suspect that the unexpected findings of Asian and Latina women might be a result of a generational attitude shift toward sex talk. Pew Research Center's (2013) data indicate that second generations of both Asian and Latin Americans who were born in the U.S. were twice as likely to identify as a "typical American" than the first generations of Asian and Latin Americans. This shift in identification might encompass one's attitude toward sex, as the younger generations of Asian and Latina women hold a more open and accepting attitude toward sex talk compared to their immigrant parents or grandparents.

Compared to Asian and Latina American women, European American women may experience fewer cultural barriers in expressing sexual matters at home with their parents and, therefore, may perceive an even weaker need to share

sex talk online. However, these explanations are based on speculations that are better addressed with future research.

Practice Implications

The findings of this study can be harnessed in educational settings and awareness campaigns for girls and women. First, although cyberspace could be viewed as a safe place for discussing sex related matters, we found that sex talk posts were judged as inappropriate, especially when they were posted on Facebook or when posted by socially distant others. Because negative perceptions of social media posts are linked to unfavorable outcomes including disruptions in relational development and maintenance and in potential employment (McEwan & Flood, 2018; Orben & Dunbar, 2017), practitioners and educators may make an effort to raise the awareness among young women regarding how sex talk posts are perceived by other women. In doing so, the role of cultural background, the level of anonymity, and relational closeness in affecting viewers' perceptions should also be communicated. For instance, practitioners may discuss the need for caution when posting sex talk because posts are visible to socially distant viewers who may evaluate them negatively. Such discussion should aim not to discourage young women from expressing sexual interests and desires online but rather to help them acquire skills to strategically manage their impression, which may help enhance their sense of control.

The results of our study call for further support for young women by acknowledging and validating their open talk about sexual interests and enjoyment. As Montemurro et al. (2015) have suggested, women feel more comfortable talking about sex openly if they see other women "lead by example" (p. 148) and if it is communicated in a "feminine way" (p. 149). Therefore, to reduce women's perceived threats and fears of engaging in sex talk in the digital space, practitioners may point young women to female role models who engage in conversations about sexual matters publicly, particularly those who come from diverse ethnic-cultural backgrounds. These female role models may share their own struggles of openly expressing sexuality and dismantling persistent gendered sexual norms in their own cultures.

Parents must continue to challenge their own roles in perpetuating the moral dilemma that girls and women face when they talk about sexual enjoyment openly, online and offline, and try to dismantle this moral dichotomy. Faculty also need to continue co-educating both male and female students that their sexualities are "socially constructed," which can lead to both "privilege and oppression" (Tolman, 2002, p.199).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study poses several limitations and lends itself to multiple directions for future research. The first limitation involves the conceptualization and assessment of cultural background. The present study treated culture as an a priori

construct with participants' ethnic identity. We did not assess participants' generational status, specific cultural heritage, or degree of identification with their cultural groups in terms of the extent to which participants retained indigenous cultural norms, especially regarding communicating sexual matters. Relatedly, we deferred to pan-ethnic groupings of Asian Americans and Latina Americans, rather than to specific ethnic groups, though research showed similarities in terms of sexual attitudes among different Asian cultural groups as well as among Latin American cultural groups (Manago et al., 2014, 2015). Therefore, future research should assess participants' specific cultural heritages and degrees of cultural identification to develop a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences among Asian and Latina Americans.

The second limitation relates to the insufficient participant information. We did not ask participants about their religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, sexual attitudes, or frequency of sex talk, nor did we ask if they had a Facebook account. All of these details might have contributed to our understanding of the motivation behind their perceived appropriateness and reported intentions of sex talk online. The third limitation is that the sample sizes of Asian and Latina Americans were much smaller than that of European Americans. Future studies should use a balanced design in order to eliminate any confounding caused by unequal sample sizes and to increase statistical power (Maxwell et al., 2017).

The fourth limitation involves our manipulation of the sex talk posts. The descriptive images included in the sex talk posts were images of a heterosexual couple and thus may not have been interpreted as relevant to lesbian women. Further, the sex talk used in this study involved only pro-sex attitudes about a non-controversial topic. Importantly, sexual disclosure includes multiple dimensions (e.g., Lefkowitz et al., 2004), ranging from sexuality, sexual health, and sexual interests to sexual encounters. It is not clear whether the current findings are specific to the domain of pro-sex attitudes or whether such posts are exactly what people experience in real life, which can threaten external validity. Future research might benefit from examining whether anonymity impacts perceived appropriateness in sex talk posts in other domains as well as from collecting participants' experience with actual sex talk online.

Further, participants were not provided with information about the post's privacy setting when exposed to a screenshot of a target's Facebook profile page. This research design is realistic, given that Facebook users are not informed about other users' privacy settings. However, it is worth examining in future research how the privacy setting of the target's post (e.g., visible only to close friends versus all "friends" on Facebook) can influence a viewer's evaluation of appropriateness. When sex talk posts are shared with only close friends on Facebook, for instance, it is possible for viewers

to feel "special" (i.e., feeling of being trusted) and to form more favorable attitudes toward those sex talk posts.

Finally, this study focused on women's evaluations of posts by same-sex peers, thus leaving our understanding of men's experiences limited. It is equally important to examine men's perceptions of—and intentions to—post sex talk online. Men's talk about sexual desires, sexual encounters, and jokes about sex tend to be normalized, functioning as a way for men to demonstrate masculinity and power (Knight et al., 2012; Pascoe, 2007). Heterosexual men learn to talk about sex in a crude manner to assert masculinity (Knight et al., 2012). As sex talk posts used in the current study did not show crude aspects, they might be regarded as "feminine" and judged as less appropriate among heterosexual men. Therefore, different patterns might emerge if men evaluate other men's sex talk online, and this should be examined in future research.

Regardless of these limitations, our research is among the first to experimentally examine how young women's perceptions of and behavioral intentions toward online sex talk are influenced by various factors such as level of anonymity, cultural background, and degree of closeness. Public discourse rarely recognizes women's sexual desires and pleasure (Koepsel, 2016), often perpetuating traditional sexual norms. We join a number of feminist scholars who highlight the importance of acknowledging and validating young women's sexual desires and pleasure (e.g., Lamb & Peterson, 2012) while recognizing their multiplicity of results toward sexual desires and pleasure due to their cultural backgrounds.


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ORCID iD

Hye Eun Lee  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7043-3640>

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