Sexual Object or Sexual Subject Media Use, Self-Sexualization, and Sexual Agency Among Undergraduate Women

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Abstract

Objectification theorists argue that repeated exposure to sexually objectifying media content leads to higher levels of self-objectification. Although consequences of self-objectification for women's sexual health and sexual agency have been proposed, efforts to test these connections have been infrequent and have yielded inconsistent results. We used structural equation modeling to test connections between exposure to three media genres (women's magazines, lifestyle reality TV, and situation comedies), self-sexualization, and four dimensions of sexual agency among 754 heterosexual and bisexual undergraduate women aged 16–23 ($M = 18.5$). Our assessments of sexual agency focused on sexual assertiveness, condom use self-efficacy, sexual affect, and alcohol use to feel sexual. Findings confirmed our expectations. More frequent consumption of women's magazines, lifestyle reality TV programs, and situation comedies each predicted greater self-sexualization, which in turn predicted greater use of alcohol to feel sexual, less condom use self-efficacy, and more negative sexual affect. We discuss implications for women's sexual well-being and for research on media sexualization. We also offer suggestions for practitioners, parents, and educators to disrupt the associations among media use, self-sexualization, and diminished sexual agency.

Keywords

media effects, sexualization, sexual agency, self-objectification

Media use is a prominent part of modern life. American children and adolescents report spending more than four hours per day watching television and nearly eight hours per day consuming media, overall (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Rates are even higher among emerging adults, those aged 18–25, who report spending 12 hours per day using media (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013). One common feature of mainstream media is the sexual objectification or sexualization of women. Media sexualization takes several forms, including verbal references to women's sexual appearance and body parts, as well as depictions of scantily clad women who serve little purpose but to look appealing. Concerning TV content, analyses have often focused on portrayals within specific genres. Analyses of workplace comedies reveal that jokes or verbal comments about women's bodies and appearance are the most common type of sexual talk (Taylor, Alexopoulos, & Ghaznavi, 2016). In addition, Lampman et al. (2002) found that 23% of the sexual behaviors featured on primetime comedies were leering, ogling, staring, and catcalling at female characters. Rates of sexual objectification are also high on reality TV. One analysis of reality programs found that female cast members exposed their bodies more than 50% of the time and exhibited higher rates of body exposure than male cast members

(Flynn, Park, Morin, & Stana, 2015). Indeed, 28.0% of female characters (vs. 11.0% of male characters) appeared partially or fully nude. Analyses of reality dating programs indicate that verbal references to women as sex objects occur 5.9 times per hour (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007).

Levels of sexual objectification are also high in print media, especially magazine articles and advertisements. In one analysis of *Seventeen* magazine, Durham (2007) found a consistent narrative that female sexuality comes from women's narrow, physical, sexual appeal to others (sexual object), and not from women's own desires. In one analysis of 58 different magazines, 51.8% of ads were found to feature

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women as sexual objects (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). These depictions were most common in men's magazines (76% of ads), women's magazines (56% of ads), and adolescent girl magazines (64% of ads). Findings also document an increasing sexualization over time. Hatton and Trautner (2011) found that sexualized representations of women on *Rolling Stone* magazine covers increased from the 1960s to the 2000s. In the 1960s, 44% of women were coded as sexualized or hypersexualized; these levels rose to 83% of women in the 2000s. The heavy presence of these themes ensures that regular consumers of these media formats likely encounter frequent representations of women as sexual objects.

How might repeated exposure to these constructions of womanhood affect women psychologically? In early theorizing about the consequences of sexual objectification, scholars proposed that existing within a culture that views and treats women as sexual objects, including media portrayals, would socialize women to take a perspective on the self whereby the body is valued mainly for its external appearance and sexual appeal to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Scholars argued that adopting this perspective toward the self, labeled *self-objectification* or an *objectified body consciousness*, would lead to negative consequences for women's well-being; indeed, self-objectification has empirically been linked to lower self-esteem, eating disorders, and reduced mental health (Moradi & Huang, 2008). One additional consequence proposed by these theorists is an effect on women's sexual well-being. Viewing themselves and their bodies as objects to be evaluated and being constantly mindful of their body's appearance have been theorized to cause women to become distanced from their bodies' internal states and to prevent women from being fully engaged during intimacy (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008). This distancing, also named *spectatoring* by Masters and Johnson (1970), is also believed to limit the pleasure drawn from one's partnered sexual experiences (Wiederman, 2001). Findings across several studies indicate that women who report greater distraction due to appearance-related and sexual performance cognitions report poorer sexual functioning on several dimensions (Dove & Wiederman, 2000; Nelson & Purdon, 2011; Purdon & Holdaway, 2006).

Having this type of self-conscious focus on the body's external appearance is also theorized to interfere with women's sexual agency (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Although scholars define sexual agency in many ways, in general it includes the acknowledgment of self as a sexual being; the ability to identify, communicate, and negotiate one's sexual needs; and the successful initiation of behaviors that allow for the satisfaction of these desires (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Froyum, 2010; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). When a woman is distanced from her internal feelings, she may find it difficult to convey (or even know) her own desires (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006). Instead, she may act based on

her partner's interests, may avoid wanted sexual activity, or may engage in risky behaviors that threaten her sexual well-being. In their review of 57 studies examining associations between women's body image and sexual arousal, desire, attitudes, and behaviors, Woertman and van den Brink (2012) found that body cognitions and evaluations not only interfere with sexual responses and experiences but also are associated with sexual avoidance and risky sexual behaviors. Thus, the expectation is that regular exposure to images of women as sexual objects may encourage women to see themselves more as sexual objects than as sexual subjects, thereby disrupting sexual experiences and diminishing healthy sexual functioning and sexual pleasure.

However, although connections from sexualized media exposure to self-objectification to sexual well-being are theorized, few studies have tested this two-step model directly, nor have scholars examined connections between exposure to sexually objectifying media and sexual well-being. Surveying 384 undergraduates, Aubrey (2007) found that frequent exposure to media rated high in sexual objectification predicted greater body-image self-consciousness during sex, but had no effect on sexual self-esteem. Tolman, Kim, Schooler, and Sorsoli (2007) found that for adolescent girls, greater exposure to TV content that highlighted feminine courtship strategies, including looking sexy, predicted more sexual experience but less sexual agency. These findings suggest that objectifying media may be problematic for women's sexual well-being, but do not provide full testing of the two-step model, nor of the mediating role of self-objectification. Accordingly, the goal of this study was to offer a more extensive test of one of the core assumptions of objectification theory. In addition, because sexual well-being is a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction, psychological well-being, and quality of life (see Byers & Rehman, 2014 for a review), understanding its predictors has broad implications for women's lives.

Previous Investigations of Individual Pathways

Although few studies have tested the full model whereby media exposure → self-objectification → sexual agency, several scholars have examined each individual connection. In a recent review of the field, Ward, Seabrook, Manago, and Reed (2016), presented findings from 13 published studies that had investigated direct connections between everyday media exposure and self-objectification among women and girls. The findings tended to support this connection, with evidence that more frequent exposure to each medium— sexually objectifying TV programs and magazines, music videos, and objectifying media, more broadly—is linked to higher trait self-objectification or higher body surveillance. For example, Aubrey (2006) found that regular exposure to 26 TV programs rated to be high in sexual objectification predicted greater self-objectification among undergraduate women. Yet evidence also indicates that these links are

complex, with some studies revealing conditional or null effects of media exposure on self-objectification (Ward et al., 2016).

The second individual pathway, a link between self-objectification and sexual well-being, has also yielded both significant and null results. Among studies testing undergraduates and adult women, scholars have linked self-objectification to poorer sexual functioning, and lower levels of sexual self-esteem, sexual self-competence, sexual self-efficacy, and sexual satisfaction (Calogero & Thompson, 2009a, 2009b; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015). Among studies testing teens, scholars have linked self-objectification to lower sexual self-efficacy, less consistent use of protection, and increased body image self-consciousness during sexual intimacy (Impett et al., 2006; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2014). However, some analyses have yielded null results. For example, both Tiggemann and Williams (2012) and Steer and Tiggemann (2008) found that neither trait self-objectification nor body surveillance correlated with sexual functioning among undergraduate women. Tolman (1999) found no association between adolescent girls' objectified relationships with their bodies and sexual agency. Together, these findings indicate that the proposed connections may be more nuanced than initially theorized.

Expanding Assessments of Self-Objectification and Sexual Agency

In working to unpack the mixed results in the literature, we argue that several factors may be at work, and focus on the field's assessments of self-objectification and sexual agency. First, we argue that measures used in the previous studies may not have tapped into some important aspects of what it might mean to internalize sexual objectification. Nearly all of the existing work has focused exclusively on self-objectification. However, objectification is only one component of sexualization, which APA (2007) defines to include any of the following: valuing a person only for her sexual appeal, to the exclusion of other characteristics; equating physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with sexiness; treating someone as a sexual object; and inappropriately imposing sexuality on someone. These beliefs can be imposed by external forces onto women, who are sexualized, or they can be imposed on the self, as self-sexualization, which involves the internalization of a belief system (APA, 2007). Thus, to self-sexualize means that women come to value themselves mainly for their sexual appeal or sexual appearance, to the exclusion of other characteristics; they equate their own attractiveness with being sexy; or they self-objectify.

Accordingly, we believe that more consistent connections to women's sexual well-being would be obtained if scales that tap into more diverse aspects of self-sexualization are used. Most studies cited earlier assessed self-objectification via the Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) or via the Trait Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). These measures assess habitual body monitoring and the valuing of the body's appearance over its functionality, yet they do not fully capture other features that may be part of self-sexualization, such as a woman's valuing of herself mainly for her sexual appeal (i.e., "I'm sexy therefore I'm worthy") or her valuing of the male gaze (i.e., "I feel better about myself when men look at me"). There is currently no one measure that captures all components of self-sexualization as an internalized belief system, although some newer scales assess self-sexualizing behaviors (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009; Smolak, Murnen, & Myers, 2014). However, we argue that individual measures that address some of the components can be used together to measure the multidimensional construct of self-sexualization. Therefore, we sought to use both traditional measures that assess self-objectification (i.e., the Surveillance subscale), as well as other measures that focus on women's valuing of their sexual appeal, together, to reflect a latent construct of self-sexualization (Ward et al., 2016).

A second means by which we sought to expand assessments was by broadening measures of sexual well-being. Common measures have focused on sexual self-esteem, safe-sex self-efficacy, and condom use (e.g., Calogero & Thompson, 2009a), constructs mostly centered on risk. Researchers seeking to capture a broader view of sexual well-being have turned to more holistic concepts such as sexual agency, which goes beyond linking sex mainly with the presence or absence of risk. Our analyses therefore focus on sexual agency, which is captured here by the following constructs: sexual assertiveness, condom use self-efficacy, sexual affect, and sexual motivations.

Our first two components of sexual agency, sexual assertiveness and condom self-efficacy, are commonly assessed measures of sexual agency (e.g., Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Impett et al., 2006). Sexual assertiveness can be conceptualized as the ability to identify one's sexual needs, wants, and desires and to communicate these to a sexual partner (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). This ability has been shown to have many benefits for the sexual well-being of women (e.g., Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993; Menard & Offman, 2009). Condom use self-efficacy reflects women's confidence in their ability to protect themselves from the risks of pregnancy and disease. These two constructs represent more traditional assessments of sexual agency.

Our third dimension of sexual agency, sexual affect, represents the emotions expressed in the self-reflection of one's sexual experience (Chilman, 1990). These include negative emotions, such as guilt, shame, and embarrassment, and positive emotions, such as pride and comfort. With the exception of Aubrey (2007) who measured anxiety, feelings about sexual experience have largely been absent from assessments of sexual agency. Yet sexual well-being is believed to include

both cognitions and affect (Byers & Rehman, 2014). Also, reflecting on one's sexual experiences, in addition to the actual experience, are proposed to be important parts of women's feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Tolman, 2002). Empirical analyses indicate that experiencing sexual shame or guilt is associated with less comfort with sexuality, lower condom use self-efficacy, and less satisfaction with one's sexual experiences (Moore & Davidson, 1997; Wayment & Aronson, 2002). Therefore, affect about one's level of sexual experience (e.g., number of sexual partners, frequency of sexual behaviors, type of sexual behaviors) is likely to be an important dimension of sexual agency.

Finally, we looked at sexual motivations. We focused specifically on women's need for alcohol with sexual activity to build on concerns that traditional sexual scripts constrain some aspects of women's sexual agency. Feminist scholars theorize that conflicting cultural expectations that women be sexual gatekeepers, attractive sexual objects, and thoughtful partner pleasers, all at the same time, create an impossible, complex "knot" for women (Livingston, Bay-Cheng, Hequembourg, Testa, & Downs, 2013). These expectations also leave little space for women's own sexual pleasure and needs (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). One way some women may cope with this "knot" is to use alcohol, both as a social lubricant and as a justification. In focus group interviews with 97 young women, Livingston and colleagues (2013) found that young women used alcohol to give them the license and courage to pursue potential partners or participate in sexual activities that might be deemed "unacceptable" under sober conditions. At the same time, women saw alcohol use as a means to deflect criticism that may be incurred following a regretted sexual encounter because the sexual acts could be blamed on the alcohol. However, because sexual agency is challenged when a woman consumes so much alcohol that she loses the ability to make cogent choices about what she wishes to do (Livingston et al., 2013), relying on alcohol in this way can be viewed as a sign of diminished sexual agency. Believing she must use alcohol to have sex or be sexual may also reflect a woman's lack of comfort with her sexuality, which runs counter to definitions of sexual agency. We therefore expanded assessments of sexual agency by including a measure of alcohol use to feel sexual.

The Current Study

Sexual objectification is a prominent aspect of modern media, and young women likely encounter this content on a regular basis. Although theorists suggest that repeated exposure to images of sexually objectified women leads to self-objectification, which in turn has negative consequences for women's health, few researchers have tested models that include sexual well-being. Moreover, analyses testing the individual pathways linking media use, self-objectification, and sexual health have yielded mixed results. We therefore sought to expand these analyses using broader assessments of both self-objectification and sexual agency, arguing that viewing herself as a sexual object might interfere with a woman's ability to act as an independent sexual agent (Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005).

First, because analyses of media sexualization have often focused on specific genres, we selected three media formats documented to contain high levels of sexually objectifying content: women's magazines, lifestyle reality TV, and sitcoms. Although women consume magazines less frequently today than they did in previous years, magazines are still significant predictors of self-objectification (e.g., Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Second, we used multiple measures to create a latent variable of self-sexualization that included standard measures of self-objectification (i.e., body surveillance), as well as assessments of women's valuing of their sexual appeal (e.g., Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011). Finally, we assessed contributions to sexual agency, instead of sexual risk, and measured agency using four dimensions: sexual assertiveness, condom use self-efficacy, sexual affect, and use of alcohol to feel sexual. We tested three hypotheses (see Figure 1). First, we predicted that greater consumption of lifestyle reality television, sitcoms, and women's magazines would be associated with greater self-sexualization (Hypothesis 1). Second, we hypothesized that greater self-sexualization would be associated with diminished sexual agency, as indicated by less sexual assertiveness, lower condom use self-efficacy, greater use of alcohol to feel sexual, and more negative feelings about one's level of sexual experience (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we hypothesized that self-sexualization would mediate the relations among lifestyle reality television, sitcoms, and women's magazines, and our four measures of sexual agency (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

We recruited participants from the psychology subject pool at a major university in the Midwest. Our initial sample consisted of 872 college-aged women. Because some of our outcome measures (e.g., condom use self-efficacy) are only applicable to women who desire sex with men, we excluded women who identified as predominantly or exclusively gay or lesbian ($n = 14$), and participants who marked "not sure" or did not indicate their sexual orientation ($n = 18$). In addition, some of our outcome measures have different meanings depending on one's level of sexual experience. For example, women without sexual experience could feel shame for not having sex, whereas women with sexual experience could feel shame for having too much sex. Therefore, we excluded women who reported no sexual or dating experience or refused to answer the question about level of sexual
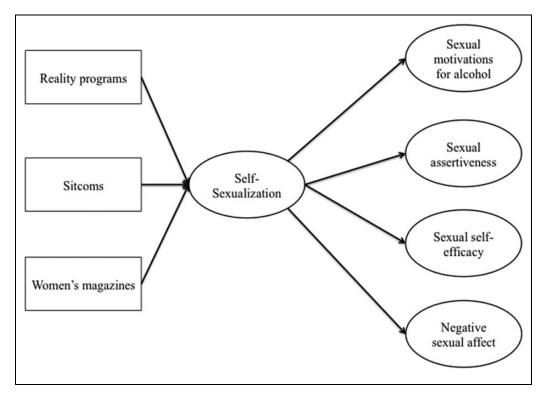
Figure 1. Proposed structural model.

experience ($n = 101$). Our final sample consisted of 754 college-aged women, aged 16–23 ($M = 18.52$, $SD = .84$). A majority of participants identified as White (74.5%; $n = 562$). Another 13.5% identified as Asian/Asian-American ($n = 102$), 5.6% ($n = 42$) as Black/African-American, 3.1% ($n = 23$) as Latina, 2.1% ($n = 16$) as Middle Eastern, and 0.5% ($n = 4$) as multiracial. Most participants identified as exclusively or predominantly heterosexual (95.9%; $n = 723$), and another 4.1% ($n = 31$) identified as bisexual.

Measures

Media exposure. In assessing media exposure, our goal was to include a relatively wide sampling of content within each genre to better capture women's everyday, cultural media exposure as discussed by objectification theorists. For the first genre, lifestyle reality TV, we provided participants with a list of 36 popular lifestyle reality programs that focused on social and romantic relationships (e.g., *Real Housewives*, *The Bachelor*, *Teen Mom*) currently airing on network TV or basic cable networks (MTV, VH1, Bravo, TLC, and E!). We chose programs based on website rankings of popular reality programs (e.g., tv.com) and on published findings concerning reality programs and college students (e.g., Egbert & Belcher, 2012). Participants indicated how frequently they had ever viewed each of the 36 programs using the following response options: *never*, *sometimes (1-4 episodes)*, *often (6-10 episodes)*, and *all of the time (most or all episodes)*. A sum across all 36 programs was calculated

(see Table 1 for mean, standard deviation, and range for each measure).

To examine magazine consumption, we asked participants to indicate how many issues per year (between zero and 12) they read of the following 12 monthly women's magazines: *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *In Style*, *Marie Claire*, *Self*, *Seventeen*, *Shape*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Women's Health*. We chose this selection partly from past research (e.g., Kim & Ward, 2012), and partly because it includes fashion magazines, health and fitness magazines, and lifestyle magazines, which may better capture the breadth of women's media environment. We computed a mean score across the 12 responses for each participant.

To assess exposure to situation comedies (sitcoms), we provided participants with a list of all sitcoms ($n = 32$) currently airing on primetime or syndication on major networks in our market (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, TNT, TBS, CW). Participants indicated how often they watched each sitcom using the following response options: *never*, *sometimes (1–4 episodes)*, *often (6–10 episodes)*, and *all of the time (most or all episodes)*. We calculated a total sum across the 32 programs.

Self-sexualization. Self-sexualization was measured via three scales. The first measure was the Surveillance sub-scale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scales–Youth (Lindberg, Hyde, & McKinley, 2006), which examines the extent to which individuals engage in regular body monitoring. We chose the youth version of the scale because 91% of our

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations for Variables of Interest (N = 674–754).

	Range	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Sexual experience	1–10	4.17	1.98												
2. Reality TV	0–96	11.63	7.91	.08*											
3. Sitcoms	0–45	16.31	9.96	.04	.13***										
4. Magazines	0–12	1.08	1.31	.08*	.26***	.14***									
5. EOS	1–6	4.24	.79	.20***	.15***	.14***	.19***								
6. SASW	1–3	1.84	.46	.10**	.13***	.10**	.13***	.50***							
7. OBJ-Surv.	1–6	4.40	1.00	.07	.10**	.12***	.18***	.40***	.52***						
8. AEQ	1–6	2.50	1.57	.37***	.20***	.11**	.14***	.36***	.30***	.23***					
9. SASS	0–4	2.43	.69	.29***	.04	-.02	.01	.13***	-.05	-.08*	-.05				
10. CUSE	1–5	3.67	.91	.14***	-.02	.03	.05	-.03	-.08*	-.04	-.03	.40***			
11. Feel Neg	0–4	.66	.72	-.13***	-.05	.09*	.09*	.14***	.27***	.30***	.12**	-.34***	-.18***		
12. Feel Pos	0–4	2.06	1.05	.10**	.03	-.06	-.06	-.02	-.14***	-.17***	-.16***	.37***	.21***	-.49***	
13. Feel Shame	0–4	.51	.77	.14***	-.01	.05	.04	.12**	.19***	.21***	.14***	-.17***	-.13***	.60***	-.34***

Note. EOS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; SASW = Sexual Appeal Self Worth Scale; OBJ-Surv. = Surveillance subscale of Objectified Body Consciousness Scales–Youth; AEQ = Sexual Use subscale of Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire; SASS = Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness; CUSE = Condom use self-efficacy; Feel Neg = Negative feelings about sexual experience level; Feel Pos = Positive feelings about level of sexual experience; Feel Shame = Shameful feelings about level of sexual experience.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

sample was aged 16–19. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each of four items (e.g., "During the day, I think about how I look many times") using a 6-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). We computed a mean score such that higher scores indicate greater body surveillance ($\alpha = .89$). Although the Surveillance subscale was originally validated on girls aged 10–12 years, the scale has been used successfully among college-aged women (e.g., Lindberg et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2016).

The second measure was the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (EOS; Liss et al., 2011), which measures the extent to which individuals attempt to and enjoy emphasizing their own sexiness. Participants indicated their agreement with eight items using a six-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include "I love to feel sexy" and "I like showing off my body." Mean scores were computed such that higher scores indicate greater enjoyment of sexualization ($\alpha = .87$). EOS scores have been validated on college women (Liss et al., 2011).

The third measure, The Sexual Appeal Self-Worth Scale (SASW; Gordon & Ward, 2000), assesses the extent to which participants base their self-worth on their sexual appeal, narrowly defined to focus on appearance. We first gave participants this prompt: "How would you feel about yourself if . . ." and asked them to indicate whether they would feel better or worse about themselves in 23 situations, 13 of which reflected their sexual appeal/attractiveness. Sample items include "You were asked to be a model for a calendar featuring college students" and "You gained 10 pounds." Participants indicated responses using a 7-point scale that ranged from –3 (*Ugh, I would feel worthless*) to +3 (*Wow! I would feel really great about myself*). Higher scores, based on absolute values ($\alpha = .81$), reflect placing a stronger emphasis on appearance and sexual appeal in perceptions of one's self-worth. The SASW has been used to assess the self-perceptions of college women in previous research (e.g., Ward et al., 2016).

Sexual agency. We captured sexual agency via four measures. The first construct, sexual assertiveness, was measured using the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (SASS; Hurlbert, 1998). Participants were asked to rate the frequency with which they engage in 25 actions with a typical sexual partner using a 5-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*all of the time*). Sample items include, "When a technique does not feel good, I tell my partner" and "I communicate my sexual desires to my partner." We calculated mean scores across the 25 items such that higher scores reflect greater sexual assertiveness ($\alpha = .90$). Although originally validated with a sample of married adult women (Hurlbert, 1991), the SASS has been used with college women in previous research (e.g., Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015; Wiederman, 2000).

The second construct, sexual self-efficacy, was measured via the Condom Use Self-Efficacy Scale (CUSE; Rosenthal,

Moore, & Flynn, 1991), which assesses participants' self-rated ability and comfort with acquiring and using condoms. Using a 5-point scale from 1 (*very uncertain*) to 5 (*very certain*), participants rated their confidence in performing five condom-related behaviors, such as, "Discuss using condoms and/or other contraceptives with a potential partner." We computed mean scores across the five items ($\alpha = .78$), such that higher scores indicated greater condom use self-efficacy. Scholars have used the CUSE successfully with college-aged women (e.g., Seabrook, Ward, Cortina, Giaccardi, & Lippman, 2017).

The third construct, sexual affect, was assessed via a scale used by Fletcher et al. (2015). This measure focuses on participants' level of comfort with their status as a sexually experienced or inexperienced person. Participants evaluated how strongly they felt 16 specific emotions (e.g., "comfortable," "embarrassed") concerning their level of sexual experience using a 5-point scale that ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). Following the model of Fletcher and colleagues (2015), we conducted a factor analysis of the 16 emotions using Principal Axis Factoring with oblimin rotation and uncovered three factors that together explained 57.8% of the variance. We called our three factors *negative feelings* (insecure, anxious, self-conscious, uneasy, frustrated, sad, confused, embarrassed; $\alpha = .89$), *positive feelings* (pleased, happy, satisfied, content, proud, comfortable; $\alpha = .90$), and *shame* (ashamed, regretful; $\alpha = .72$). The positive feelings subscale was reverse-scored so that higher scores for each subscale would indicate more negative feelings about one's level of sexual experience. Together, negative feelings, positive feelings (reverse-scored), and shame comprised the latent variable negative sexual affect. These dimensions of sexual affect were the same ones that had emerged among the original sample of college-aged women (Fletcher et al., 2015).

The final sexual agency construct addressed sexual motivations, focused specifically on women's use of alcohol to feel sexual. To test this component, we used the five-item Sexual Use subscale of the Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire (AEQ; Brown, Christiansen, & Goldman, 1987). AEQ scores have been validated on a sample of college students (Brown et al., 1987). Participants indicated their agreement with each of 18 possible motivations for using alcohol using a 6-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*); an NA option (*not applicable to me*) was also provided for each item. We analyzed only the five items reflecting sexual use, such as "I often feel sexier after I've had a few drinks" and "I enjoy having sex more if I've had some alcohol." We computed a mean score across these five items ($\alpha = .91$) such that higher scores indicate greater use of alcohol to feel sexual.

Sexual experience. We asked participants to indicate their general level of experience with dating and sexual relationships via one item that ranged from 0 (*just starting out/virgin*) to 10 (*have had several sexual relationships/not a virgin*). We excluded from analyses participants without any dating or sexual experience (scores of zero).

Procedure

All students enrolled in introductory psychology classes could sign up for this study; those younger than 18 had received parental permission to participate in the subject pool. The study was advertised on an online system and was identified by number only; therefore, participants did not know what the study was about before registering to participate. Participants completed either tablet or paper-and-pencil surveys during small-group administrations in a research lab on campus. Participants were informed that it was a study of media use and social relationships. The survey packet contained several instruments that were not analyzed here, including measures of sexual attitudes, gender ideologies, and mental health, as part of a larger, four-year study. One study from these data has been published elsewhere, focusing on different media predictors and different psychosocial predictors of young women's experiences (Seabrook et al., 2017).[1] We arranged the measures in several different orders across the survey packets. Administration of the full survey took approximately 45 min, including consent and debriefing procedures.

Results

We present descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for variables of interest in Table 1. As expected, indicators of the same latent construct were significantly correlated (e.g., enjoyment of sexualization, sexual appeal self-worth, and surveillance were all correlated with each other). Because sexual experience level was significantly correlated with all outcome variables, we included it as a control variable in all subsequent analyses.

Results of Tests of Hypotheses

We tested our proposed model (see Figure 1) using structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation (ML). We used MPlus software to conduct our analysis. MPlus is able to use ML with missing data on endogenous variables. Six of our endogenous variables had some missing data (9.1% on sexual assertiveness, 3.7% on sexual self-efficacy, 2.8% on sexual motivations for using alcohol, 0.7% on positive feelings, 0.9% on negative feelings, and 1.1% on shame). We could not test for significant differences in race or sexual orientation between those with and without missing data because cell sizes were too small. We did test for differences in age between those with and without missing data. Participants with missing data on sexual motivations for alcohol use were significantly older than those without missing data, $t(752) = 2.92$, $p = .004$. There
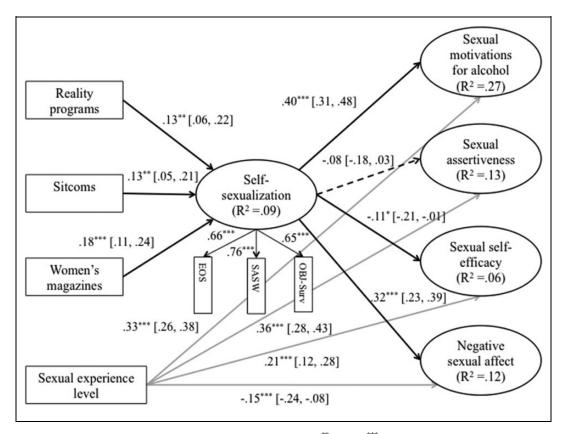
Figure 2. Final structural model with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. $^{**}p < .01.$ $^{***}p < .001.$ EOS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; SASW = Sexual Appeal Self Worth Scale; OBJ-Surv = Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scales–Youth. Grey lines denote pathways from control variable to outcome variables.

were no other differences in age between those participants with and without missing data. Therefore, we assume data were missing at random.

We created three parcels to serve as indicators for each of our outcome measures (sexual assertiveness, sexual self-efficacy, negative sexual affect, and sexual motivations for alcohol) using the item-to-parcel balance technique (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Using this technique, we conducted a factor analysis with one factor for each scale and distributed individual scale items across three parcels according to their factor loadings (e.g., the highest loading item on Parcel 1, second highest on Parcel 2, third highest on Parcel 3, fourth highest on Parcel 1, and so on), until all items were distributed across the three parcels. The use of parcels is advantageous for both psychometric reasons (e.g., aggregate data, rather than individual items, has higher reliability) and model fit reasons (e.g., fewer parameters must be estimated, thus requiring smaller sample size; Little et al., 2002). The item-to-parcel balance technique is used to "derive parcels that are equally balanced in terms of their difficulty and discrimination (intercept and slope)" (Little et al., 2002, p. 166).

First, we tested a measurement model for the latent constructs in which each latent construct is permitted to vary freely with all other latent constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). If the measurement model provides an adequate fit to the data, it is acceptable to proceed with a structural model. Our measurement model provided an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(80) = 220.35$, $p < .001$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, 90% confidence interval (CI) [.04, .06], comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, square root mean residual (SRMR) = .04 using the guidelines provided by Kline (2011) and Little (2013): RMSEA and 90% CI that fall below .10, a CFI above .95, and SRMR below .06 all represent acceptable fit. All indicators loaded onto their latent constructs significantly at $p < .001$.

Next, we tested our proposed structural model. Our proposed model provided an adequate fit for the data, $\chi^2(133) = 358.24$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.04, .05], CFI = .96, SRMR = .05 (see Figure 2) and explained a significant portion of the variance in each outcome variable: self-sexualization, $R^2 = .09$, $p < .001$; sexual assertiveness, $R^2 = .13$, $p < .001$; sexual self-efficacy, $R^2 = .06$, $p < .01$; negative sexual affect, $R^2 = .12$, $p < .001$; and sexual motivations for alcohol, $R^2 = .27$, $p < .001$. As expected, consumption of lifestyle reality programs, sitcoms, and magazines predicted greater self-sexualization (Hypothesis 1), which in turn predicted lower sexual self-efficacy, more negative sexual affect, and stronger sexual motivations for alcohol use (Hypothesis 2). Contrary to expectation, we did not find a

Table 2. Standardized Indirect Effects of Media Use on Sexual Agency Through Self-Sexualization.

Outcome	Reality TV		Sitcoms		Magazines	
	IE	95% CI	IE	95% CI	IE	95% CI
AEQ	.05	[.02, .09]	.05	[.02, .09]	.07	[.04, .10]
SASS	−.01	[−.03, .00]	−.01	[−.03, .00]	−.02	[−.04, .01]
CUSE	−.02	[−.04, −.00]	−.02	[−.04, −.00]	−.02	[−.04, −.00]
Negative sexual affect	.04	[.02, .07]	.04	[.02, .08]	.06	[.03, .09]

Note. AEQ = Sexual Use subscale of Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire; CUSE = Condom Use Self-Efficacy; SASS = Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness. Negative Sexual Affect refers to negative affect regarding level of sexual experience.

relation between self-sexualization and sexual assertiveness (Hypothesis 2).

We tested whether self-sexualization mediated the relations among media use and sexual agency (Hypothesis 3) by calculating the bootstrapped (1,000 draws) indirect effects and 95% CIs for those effects. If the 95% CI does not contain zero, there is evidence of mediation (i.e., a significant indirect effect). We found evidence of mediation among the media variables and negative sexual affect and sexual motivations for alcohol use, but not sexual self-efficacy or sexual assertiveness (see Table 2). Thus, our third hypothesis was partially supported.

Alternative Models

We compared the fit of our proposed model to two alternative models. In the first alternative model, negative sexual affect mediated the relations among media and self-sexualization, sexual assertiveness, sexual self-efficacy, and sexual motivations for alcohol use. We chose negative sexual affect as a mediator because it is a cognition (e.g., how do you *feel* about sexual experience), whereas the other outcomes are proximal measures of behavior (e.g., how comfortable are you *using* a condom). The alternative model provided an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(133) = 389.13$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.05, .06], CFI = .96, SRMR = .06, but it did not fit as well as our proposed model. Our proposed model had a lower chi-square value (358.24 vs. 389.13) and lower SRMR (.05 vs. .06) than the alternative model. In addition, our proposed model had a lower Akaike's information criterion (AIC; 24,406.80 vs. 24,437.69), which can be used to compare the fit of non-nested models. A lower AIC is preferred (Kline, 2011).

In the second alternative model, self-sexualization was related to each of the three media variables, which in turn were related to sexual assertiveness, sexual self-efficacy, negative sexual affect, and sexual motivations for alcohol use. This model did not provide a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(131) = 493.38$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.06, .07], CFI = .94, SRMR = .08. Readers are free to contact the first author with any questions about the data or analyses.

Discussion

According to the World Health Organization, sexual health includes freedom from disease and the ability to have safe, pleasurable, and respectful relationships (World Health Organization, 2006). To what extent might exposure to cultural messages that treat women as sexual objects, instead of agentic sexual subjects, impede women's efforts to be sexually healthy? We sought to examine this question by looking at one type of cultural message: exposure to mainstream media genres that commonly feature sexually objectifying portrayals of women. Following assumptions proposed by objectification theorists, we tested whether regular exposure to three prominent media genres (women's magazines, lifestyle reality programs, and situation comedies) is associated with self-sexualization, which in turn is associated with diminished sexual agency. Although existing work has tested these pathways separately, they have seldom been tested together in one model that could examine both direct and mediated pathways. Our expectations were mostly confirmed. Because our data are correlational, not causal, and because our participants were predominantly White, heterosexual, undergraduate women, we acknowledge that the strength and generalizability of our findings are limited. Yet the findings still offer significant implications for research, practice, and women's lives.

Implications of Findings Concerning Self-Sexualization

Our study adds to the body of literature on the negative effects of self-objectification and self-sexualization. More specifically, engaging in self-sexualization was associated with more negative feelings about one's level of sexual experience, lower sexual self-efficacy, and greater use of alcohol to feel sexual. Evidence of mediation emerged for the alcohol motivations and sexual affect outcomes. These findings support theoretical propositions of objectification theorists, and indicate that not only might self-sexualization spurred by media exposure be associated with lower self-esteem, disordered eating, and mental health symptoms (Moradi & Huang, 2008), but it may also be linked with a reduction in women's sense of efficacy and comfort with their sexual experiences. Although some scholars have argued that sexualization may

be empowering for women (see Liss et al., 2011, for analysis), the associations between self-sexualization and diminished sexual agency in our study call into question the assertion that sexualization is empowering. Rather than being an empowered sexuality, an objectified sexuality may be more of a performance done for the pleasure of one's partner rather than oneself. Indeed, Erchull and Liss (2014) found that greater enjoyment of sexualization was associated with having faked orgasm, which, they argued, is a sexual practice that involves shifting the focus from one's own sexual pleasure to one's partner, and may indicate that sex is viewed more as a performance than as an activity for one's own pleasure.

Within our four components of sexual agency, we found a particularly strong meditational effect of self-sexualization on the relation between media consumption and the use of alcohol to feel sexual. There are several potential reasons for this pattern of findings. First, the observed difference in associations may be due to the characteristics of our sample. Our sample consisted of undergraduate women, and alcohol use is a common feature of the hookup culture on residential college campuses (e.g., Berntson, Hoffman, & Luff, 2014). Fielder and Carey (2010) found that 64% of the first-semester undergraduate women surveyed reported drinking prior to a hookup. As such, the use of alcohol to facilitate sexual encounters may be especially normative for this group. Second, sitcoms and reality television programs frequently depict the use of alcohol to facilitate sexual encounters, which may validate this sexual strategy in viewers' minds. In a content analysis of nine reality dating series, Kim and Wells (2017) found that 66.7% of scenes depicting some form of sexual behavior also made a visual reference to alcohol use. Our data suggest that regular exposure to sitcoms and lifestyle reality programming, which frequently pair alcohol use with sexual behavior, is associated with an increased likelihood to use alcohol to facilitate one's own sexual encounters.

However, using alcohol to feel sexual may increase women's chances of participating in unwanted sexual experiences. In one study of 828 college students (LaBrie, Hummer, Ghaidarov, Lac, & Kenney, 2014), among women who had consumed alcohol prior to their last hookup, 30.7% indicated that they likely would not have hooked up with their partners had alcohol not been involved. In addition, 34.4% of women indicated that they would not have gone as far physically if they had not been drinking. Using alcohol to feel sexual may be part of a vicious cycle that makes it difficult for women to feel good about their sexual experiences. In fact, according to some legal definitions of sexual assault, individuals who are incapacitated due to the effects of alcohol or drugs are incapable of consenting to sex (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007).

Contrary to our hypotheses, we did not find a relation between self-sexualization and sexual assertiveness. Sexual assertiveness includes refusing sex, initiating sex, and demanding attention to one's pleasure. It is possible that some components of sexual assertiveness, such as demanding one's own pleasure, may support self-sexualization, whereas other components may not. For example, if a woman endorses the idea that her sexuality is based on her appearance and is in service to her male partner, she may have trouble telling her partner what she desires. However, if a woman endorses the idea that her sexuality is in service to her male partner, she may be able to initiate sexual activity in order to please him. We may not have found a significant relation between self-sexualization and sexual assertiveness because some components of sexual assertiveness may not be at odds with self-sexualization. Whereas sexual assertiveness, overall, is typically associated with markers of sexual agency, such as sexual self-esteem and sexual satisfaction (e.g., Menard & Offman, 2009), there may be subcomponents within the construct, such as initiating sex, that result from differing and possibly less agentic motives. Future research teams should explore potential subcomponents of sexual assertiveness and their correlates.

Implications of Findings for Analyses of Media Sexualization

We demonstrated that frequent, regular exposure to several media formats predicted women's self-sexualization, providing a nice complement both to experimental studies (e.g., Aubrey & Gerding, 2015) and to studies that have tested regular exposure to a few TV programs or magazines identified as sexualized (e.g., Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Although experimental studies allow for causal assertions, they also introduce an artificiality that could diminish the relevance of the findings. It is possible that the content shown is so objectifying that women would not normally choose to consume it, or that the experimental effects are only short-term laboratory artifacts that say little about the extended effects of media in the real world. By demonstrating connections between everyday exposure to common media genres and women's self-sexualization, we provided support for the premises proposed by objectification theorists (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) that women's existence in a cultural environment that offers multiple examples of sexual objectification is associated with a tendency among women to sexualize themselves.

Future analyses of media sexualization can build on these findings in several ways. First, given the multidimensional nature of sexual agency, it would be useful to determine whether the patterns demonstrated here extend to other dimensions such as sexual satisfaction, sexual self-concept, and entitlement to sexual pleasure. Second, researchers should work to identify potential mediators of the theorized connections. Scholars have begun to document several possible mediators of the connection from media use to self-objectification, including internalization of cultural ideals (Morry & Staska, 2001; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012),

body self-consciousness (Aubrey, 2007), and appearance comparisons (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015). Others have found that paths from self-objectification to sexual well-being are mediated by factors such as self-consciousness during sexual activity (Claudat & Warren, 2014; Vencill, Tebbe, & Garos, 2015), body appreciation (Winter, 2017), and appearance anxiety (Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). Researchers should incorporate some of these mediators in their analyses and should explore and document additional ones.

Practice Implications

Given the negative contributions of sexualized media found here and in previous research (see Ward, 2016 for review), what can we do to prevent women from taking an objectified view of themselves? Although nearly all women in the United States are exposed to sexually objectifying media content, some are able to escape the negative effects and instead embrace an empowered sexuality (Murnen & Smolak, 2013). Identifying factors that allow these young women to adopt an empowered sexuality may provide practitioners and educators with methods for interrupting the associations between sexualizing media and diminished sexual agency.

Media literacy programs are one way in which we can combat the negative effects of sexualized media on women's well-being. Organizations such as Girls, Inc., SPARK, and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media create lessons to help young women take notice of, and challenge, the depictions of women in the media. Practitioners, parents, and educators should consider consulting these agencies for educational programs they can utilize to encourage media literacy in young women and men.

Encouraging women to adopt a feminist identity may also be helpful in reducing the effects of sexualized media and promoting sexual agency. By challenging and rejecting gendered expectations, including the expectation that women be valued as sexual objects, those who adopt a feminist identity may be protected from the negative effects of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts. Schick, Zucker, and Bay-Cheng (2008) found that having a feminist identity was associated with greater condom use self-efficacy, greater sexual satisfaction, and greater likelihood to have sex because of their own interest rather than to please a male partner. Encouraging women to adopt a feminist identity may be instrumental in combatting the negative effects of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, including self-sexualization.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the useful findings reported here, we acknowledge three limitations of the current study that future researchers may want to address. First, we only assessed a segment of women's media diets, and one media genre we included, women's magazines, was consumed infrequently (although they still showed an effect in our model). Other forms of media use, such as social media use or exposure to sexually objectifying content in popular music lyrics, may also contribute to women's tendency to self-sexualize and should be examined in future research. Also not addressed were women's interpersonal experiences of objectification, such as exposure to objectifying comments from parents and peers. These two forces (media exposure and interpersonal experiences) likely work in tandem to lead women to internalize the cultural message that sexual appeal is their chief asset. Researchers should investigate how these forces work both individually and together to contribute to women's self-sexualization. Moreover, we did not examine less traditional forms of media that may contain more progressive depictions of sex and gender. For example, women who watch feminist YouTube channels (e.g., Feminist Frequency, Franchesca Ramsey) or read feminist blogs (e.g., Feministing) may experience less self-sexualization and greater sexual agency as a result of their media consumption. Future work should examine the nuances of media genres, as we do not mean to suggest that all media sexualize women.

A second limitation to the current study is the homogeneity of our sample in terms of race, age, and sexual orientation; in future studies, researchers will want to determine if and how these processes apply to more diverse samples of women. For example, many measures of sexual agency, including some used in this study (e.g., condom use self-efficacy), do not apply to women who have sex with women (McNair, 2005). In addition, the relation between self-sexualization and sexual agency may be differentially expressed depending on the gender of one's sexual partner. Within interpersonal relationships, women may not experience the same level of self-objectification and self-sexualization when having sex with women because they are not subjects of the male gaze (e.g., Mulvey, 1975).

Third, because of the cross-sectional design, we cannot make firm conclusions about the direction of the relations tested. Just as media use has been found to predict viewers' attitudes, so too do attitudes and behaviors predict viewers' media selections (Slater, 2007). Using a longitudinal design would permit firmer conclusions about causal paths. However, we did find that the alternative model we tested in which self-sexualization predicts media use did not fit our data as well as the proposed model.

Conclusions

In using a model that tests both an antecedent (i.e., media use) and consequences of self-sexualization, we were able to fully test a vital yet understudied assumption of objectification theorists. We found that media use is associated with self-sexualization, which is related to diminished sexual agency. Our findings highlight the utility of including broader assessments both of self-sexualization and of sexual well-being. We believe that women with diminished sexual agency may be

especially vulnerable to negative sexual health outcomes and to unwanted sexual experiences. Encouraging women both to reject traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, including self-sexualization scripts, and to recognize the unrealistic images presented in the media may help protect young women from feeling less sexually agentic.

Author Note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Note

1. Portions of this data set have been combined with data from young men to examine social media use and mental health (Hanna et al., 2017), social media use and sexual agency (Manago et al., 2015), contributions of movies and music videos (Ward et al., 2016), and media contributions to beliefs about courtship and relationships (Lippman, Ward, & Seabrook, 2014; Seabrook et al., 2016).

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