The Relationship Between Self-Sexualization and Sexually Objectified Experience

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Significance. Living in a culture in which the female body is sexually objectified, women often experience sexual objectification (e.g., being stared at or touched against their will). This may lead to various negative psychophysiological consequences (Miner-Rubino et al., 2002). While objectifying a woman has been widely criticized for itself and for its harm, the question then arises: Do women who voluntarily self-sexualize themselves (e.g., wearing revealing clothing, posting sexualized selfies) undergo similar degrees of sexual objectifying experiences, as well as negative consequences? Despite the growing number of studies on self-sexualization, the direct association between self-sexualization and sexually objectifying experiences has yet to be fully explored. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between self-sexualizing behaviors and sexually objectifying experiences, which leads to a particular negative consequence: body shame.

Application of literature. In a modern sexualized culture where female sexual self-presentation is common, some women willingly sexualize themselves for self-fulfilling reasons, such as popularity, fun, and power. While the idea that these reasons are truly self-fulfilling remains contentious, researchers are conducting empirical studies pointing toward a more holistic view of self-sexualization (Johnson & Yu, 2021). Some studies approach self-sexualization as a type of internalization or endorsement of sexual objectification; thus, they examine self-sexualization as an outcome of sexually objectifying experiences, such as exposure to sexualized media (e.g., Ward et al., 2016). However, the flipside, self-sexualization as the antecedent to sexually objectifying experiences, though a possibility, deserves exploration.

It is naturally expected that women who self-sexualize themselves are more likely to receive sexualized attention; this may also include unwanted attention as well. There is some empirical support for this relationship. A study examining the interpersonal consequences of self-sexualization (De Wilde et al., 2021) reported that self-sexualizing women are perceived to encounter more objectifying incidents. Moreover, Stuart and Kurek (2019) found evidence that self-sexualizing women did receive negative treatment from others. For instance, they found that adolescent girls who frequently take sexualized selfies tend to experience more aggression online. Another study reported positive correlations between enjoyment of self-sexualization and frequency of sexually objectified encounters, though it was not tested as a causal relationship (Liss et al., 2011).

Will women who use their sexuality as a source of power, empowering themselves through self-sexualization, experience negative consequences resulting from sexually objectifying experiences? Liss et al. (2011) explored the concept of enjoyment in self-sexualization mitigating the negative effects from internalizing objectifying experiences (i.e., self-objectification); on the contrary, they found that enjoyment in self-sexualization rather enhanced the negative effects. Choi (2021) also found that a particular type of self-sexualizing belief (equating attractiveness with being sexy) led to greater body shame. Moscatelli et al. (2021) found that another type of self-sexualizing belief vis-à-vis the internalization of sexualized feminine roles (e.g., believing women should be sexually appealing to men) led to greater tolerance of sexual harassment.

The shift in sexual empowerment through self-sexualization amongst young and older female demographics is also a meaningful topic for research. For example, a significant minority of younger women participate in self-presentation via digital media, as a result of egocentrism and digital narcissism strengthening sexualized behaviors (Sarabia & Estevez, 2016). In light of this, exploring the young generation's self-sexualizing behaviors and their impact on psychological and physical consequences may reveal additional insight into the effect of self-sexualizing behaviors on sexual objectification experiences and negative consequences.

Therefore, we hypothesize that women who self-sexualize may encounter a greater degree of sexually objectifying experiences and a greater negative consequence, measured by body shame. We analyze both self-empowering sexualization (measured with the Sex is Power Scale) and general self-sexualizing behaviors (measured with the Sexualizing Behavior Scale), across young and older female demographics, to explore whether differences in self-sexualization influence the frequency of sexually objectified experiences and body shame (i.e., feeling of shame when they are not satisfied with their body).

Methods. An online questionnaire was created to measure the four variables adopted from previous studies, which are the following: sex is power (Erchull & Liss, 2013), sexualizing behavior (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009), sexual objectification experiences (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), and body shame (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. There was a total of 308 female participants who were predominantly Caucasians (64.5%), followed by Asian (12.3%), African America (9.6%), American Indian (6.9%), etc. The mean age was 30.83 (SD: 1.05). Collected data were analyzed using SPSS 23.0 for descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, and reliability analysis. AMOS 23.0 was employed for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis.

Results. The results of CFA indicated that the measurement showed a satisfactory fit: χ^2=443.730 (df=224, p=.000), normed χ^2=1.981, GFI=.883, CFI=.963, NFI=.929, RMSEA=.057. The instruments' convergent validity, composite reliability and constructs' discriminant validity were also satisfactory. The results of SEM revealed that the effect of general self-sexualizing

behaviors on body shame was significant (β=.274, p <.001). This effect (β=.676, p <.001) was also mediated by sexual objectification experiences (β=.340, p <.001). However, the effect of self-empowering sexualization on sexual objectification experiences and body shame was not significant.

The moderating effect of age was tested by comparing the structural model of two female groups: young (mean age = 26.42, n = 123) vs. mature demographic (mean age = 42.84, n = 185). For the mature demographic, the effect of general self-sexualizing behaviors on body shame was significant, and this effect was mediated by sexual objectification experiences; however, the self-empowering sexualization effect was not significant. For the young demographic, all path coefficient was significant, except the connection between sexual objectification experiences and body shame. Even if young females use their sexuality as a source of empowerment, they still experienced sexual objectification and body shame.

Discussion. This study provides a degree of resolution regarding the contentious idea around self-sexualization. The evidence provides support that not all self-sexualizing women experience a negative consequence from sexually objectified experiences. However, young women are at greater risk from self-sexualization because regardless of differences in self-sexualization, self-sexualizing behaviors can not only lead to more sexual objectification but also directly lead to a feeling of body shame even in the absence of sexual objectification.

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