



# Examining the unique contribution of body appreciation to heterosexual women's sexual agency

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## ABSTRACT

Although numerous studies demonstrate links between negative body image and sexual well-being, recent research has emphasized studying the positive aspects of these constructs. The current study built upon this prior research by examining the association between body appreciation and sexual agency among a US community sample of 355 heterosexual women aged 18–40. This study also examined whether body appreciation is uniquely associated with sexual agency above and beyond levels of self-objectification. Regression analyses demonstrated that women who reported greater body appreciation also reported greater condom use self-efficacy, sexual satisfaction, sexual assertiveness, and feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure, and lower levels of body self-consciousness during intimacy. These findings remained consistent even when self-objectification was entered into the model as a covariate. Results highlight the importance of studying how body appreciation may promote women's sexual agency.

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## 1. Introduction

Research repeatedly demonstrates that having an objectified view of one's body contributes to diminished physical, mental, and sexual well-being among women (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Although analyses testing links between women's body image and sexuality initially focused on negative body attitudes and poorer sexual functioning, recent approaches have shifted attention to consider women's positive feelings about their bodies and sexuality (e.g., Ramseyer Winter & Satinsky, 2014; Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012). Included in these analyses are constructs such as sexual subjectivity and sexual agency, which highlight women's ability to reflect upon, communicate, and negotiate the fulfillment of their sexual desires (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005), in addition to more traditional constructs related to sexual well-being such as sexual satisfaction. Given these shifts in how researchers are conceptualizing body image and sexuality, we sought to investigate associations between women's tendency to monitor their appearance (self-objectification; a facet of negative body image), the appreciation they have for their bodies (body appreciation; a facet of positive body image), and multiple measures of sexual agency.

### 1.1. Self-objectification and its connections to women's sexual health

Objectification theory posits that women in our society are often treated as a body, or as a collection of body parts, whose value is determined by their appearance and their utility to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The pervasive objectification of women's bodies in our culture leads many women to assume an objectified body consciousness, whereby they internalize the sexually objectifying male gaze and thus view their own bodies from an outsider's perspective (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) theorized that this tendency to self-objectify would manifest in the form of greater body surveillance, greater anxiety, reduced flow states (e.g., concentration), and reduced internal bodily awareness (e.g., incorrectly interpreting hunger cues or physiological arousal). They further posited that women with this objectified view of their body would be at higher risk of depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction.

Studies testing the association between self-objectification and women's sexual well-being have largely supported these assumptions (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Objectification theorists proposed that as a consequence of increased body monitoring, self-consciousness, and lack of awareness regarding internal bodily states, women's sexual functioning would be affected. Some analyses indicate that body shame (Steer & Tiggemann, 2008) and appearance anxiety (Tiggemann & Williams, 2012) are linked

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directly to lower levels of sexual functioning. Other researchers have found that body surveillance is linked to lower levels of sexual satisfaction through mediators such as sexual self-esteem, body shame, and body self-consciousness (Calogero & Thompson, 2009a, 2009b; Claudat & Warren, 2014) and is linked to lower levels of sexual behavior through increased sexual body consciousness (Rousseau, Beyens, Eggermont, & Vandenbosch, 2017). Stronger tendencies to self-objectify have also been associated with reduced confidence negotiating condom use with a partner, both directly and indirectly via reduced feelings of control during the sexual encounter or increased body shame (Littleton, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2005; Parent & Moradi, 2015). Furthermore, studies have shown that having an objectified body consciousness is linked to diminished sexual self-efficacy, protection behaviors (e.g., condom use), and sexual assertiveness (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006; Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015; Tolman, 1999). Together, these results support the proposed links between self-objectification and women's sexual well-being, suggesting that a woman's tendency to self-objectify could negatively affect both her feelings about her body and her behavior in sexual contexts.

### 1.2. Expanding conceptualizations of sexual functioning to include sexual agency

To date, most studies of women's sexuality have focused on assessments of physiological sexual functioning, condom use self-efficacy, or sexual satisfaction. Given the breadth and depth of women's sexual experiences, we argue that conceptualizing women's sexuality in terms of sexual agency may be beneficial towards further expanding our understanding of women's sexual selves. *Sexual agency* is a multidimensional construct that reflects the awareness of self as a sexual being; the ability to identify, negotiate, and communicate one's sexual needs; and the successful initiation of behaviors that allow for the satisfaction of these needs (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Froyum, 2010; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). Researchers operating within this framework examine women's self-perceptions, but also link these self-perceptions to specific sexual decisions and behaviors. In operationalizing this construct, researchers have assessed sexual self-esteem, sexual self-efficacy, feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure, sexual assertiveness, confidence negotiating condom use, and condom use itself (Franzoi & Shields, 1984; Hurlburt, 1991; Rosenthal, Moore, & Flynn, 1991).

Although the body of work examining sexual agency builds on traditional studies of women's sexuality (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012), the notion of "agency" allows for a more comprehensive understanding both of how women feel about their sexual selves and how these perceptions are reflected in their sexual behavior. Given that sexual well-being is one of the strongest predictors of overall psychological well-being and quality of life (Byers & Rehman, 2014), maintaining one's sexual well-being and learning to recognize and articulate one's sexual desires (a key component of sexual agency) are essential to women's overall well-being. We therefore sought to expand upon the extant literature by clarifying the role of self-objectification in predicting several aspects of women's sexual agency, which have not been fully examined together. Mirroring this focal shift to *positive* aspects of sexual well-being, such as sexual agency, some researchers have shifted attention from contributions of *negative* body image on sexual well-being to address potential contributions of women's *positive* feelings about their bodies on their sexual well-being.

### 1.3. Positive body image and sexual agency

With the emergence of positive psychology (psychology with an emphasis on positive subjective experience and positive indi-

vidual traits; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), researchers have increasingly emphasized that the study of both positive and negative aspects of body image are essential to moving the field forward (Cash, 2004). Proponents of this approach suggest that by studying positive aspects of body image, researchers can make important strides towards understanding how to protect women from negative body image threats. Accordingly, Avalos, Tylka, and Wood-Barcalow (2005) developed the Body Appreciation Scale, the use of which has become ubiquitous in the positive body image literature. After publication of the initial Body Appreciation Scale, qualitative work with individual interviews (e.g., Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010) and focus groups (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisé, 2012) helped construct a richer, yet more precise definition of the components comprising positive body image. Together, this work has formed the basis for current understanding of positive body image, which includes aspects of body appreciation, body acceptance and love, broadly conceptualizing beauty, adaptive appearance investment, and inner positivity (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). With this framework, it can be seen that positive body image is not simply the absence of negative body image or body dissatisfaction, but instead appears to reflect a unique set of feelings that women have about their bodies. In support of this notion, research has demonstrated that when predicting outcomes such as men and women's well-being, positive body image accounts for unique variance above and beyond traditional measures of negative body image (Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a).

For this study, we chose to focus on one aspect of positive body image, body appreciation. *Body appreciation* is defined as appreciation for what the body can do, what it represents, and how it looks, regardless of whether or not these looks align with culturally defined standards of beauty (Avalos et al., 2005). Analyses indicate that possessing an appreciation for one's body is related to various components of one's health and well-being. Women who reported greater appreciation for their bodies also reported greater body esteem, less body shame, and less self-objectification (Avalos et al., 2005). Outside of the body image domain, body appreciation has also been associated with greater reported psychological well-being and self-compassion (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Wasylkiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). Finally, some work has demonstrated that women's feelings of body appreciation manifest not only psychologically, but behaviorally, as women who reported greater feelings of appreciation for their body were more likely to use sun protection, seek out regular skin screenings, and report seeking medical attention (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016). Similarly, body appreciation prospectively predicted decreased dieting behavior and alcohol and cigarette use, and increased physical activity and intuitive eating (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016). Together, this work demonstrates that women who appreciate their body not only have fewer negative feelings about their bodies in general, but also behave in ways that are both psychologically and behaviorally healthier.

One area of particular interest to scholars studying body appreciation is sexual well-being. It may be the case that women who express higher levels of body appreciation may be uniquely positioned to behave agentically in their sexual encounters and may prioritize their sexual pleasure more than women who express lower levels of body appreciation. Women who appreciate their bodies may have a certain self-awareness about cultural narratives of women's bodies and normative body dissatisfaction. Their decision to appreciate their bodies in spite of this dominant cultural narrative may empower them to resist other dominant cultural narratives, such as those which diminish the importance of women's sexual pleasure (Satinsky et al., 2012; Tolman, 1994). The handful of studies examining associations between body appreciation and sexual well-being validate this expectation. For example,

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