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Picture this: Women's self-sexualization in photos on social media☆

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which young women post sexualized photos of themselves on Instagram and Facebook, whether these photos garner positive feedback in the form of "likes" and friends/followers, explore individual differences that predict which women post self-sexualized photos, and test whether posting self-sexualized photos on social media actually relate to feelings of sexual agency (i.e., control over one's own sexuality). Undergraduate women ($N = 61$) downloaded the ten most recent photographs of themselves posted on Instagram and/or Facebook and completed a variety of survey measures. Systematic coding of the resulting 1060 photos revealed that rates of self-sexualization were relatively low, though participants posted more sexualized photos to Instagram than to Facebook. Wanting attention on social media was the strongest predictor of posting self-sexualized photos, and indeed, more sexualized photos garnered more likes on Instagram than less sexualized photos, and women who post more sexualized photos tend to get more likes in general and more friends/followers on both Instagram and Facebook. Interestingly, posting self-sexualizing photos was not associated with actual sexual agency in offline encounters. These findings suggest the importance of cultural differences between platforms and of understanding women's desire for attention on social media.

The sexualization of women in Western media is pervasive and has widespread consequences, including poorer body image among women, greater support of sexist beliefs, and more tolerance toward sexual violence against women (Ward, 2016). It also increases self-objectification, wherein women see themselves from a third-person perspective, value their bodies primarily for how they look, and present themselves in a sexualized manner as objects to be used (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Social media provides a new arena to investigate how women sexualize themselves via user-generated content, such as the photos posted on sites like Instagram and Facebook. Public concern has been repeatedly expressed regarding the posting of sexualized photographs by young women; for example, in early 2016 journalist Nancy Jo Sales published a book about girls' sexualized behavior online that immediately made it to the New York Times Best Seller list, and online articles about the book garnered hundreds of concerned comments (e.g., NPR, 2016). However, because of the relative novelty of social media, little research has been published that explores this phenomenon. The present study is a systematic analysis of the degree of sexualization in photographs posted by young women on Instagram and Facebook, the responses (in terms of "likes") to those photographs, and the individual differences associated with posting them.

The scant previous research on self-sexualization (i.e., intentionally engaging in activities to appear more sexually appealing; Smolak, Murnen, & Myers, 2014) on social media leads to mixed conclusions. After conducting focus groups with undergraduate students about MySpace, Manago, Graham, Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) concluded that the culture of objectification does pressure young women to post sexualized photos (e.g., photos where women attempt to seem sexy, wear less clothing, etc.) of themselves online, in part because they are likely to receive positive comments on sexualized photos. Indeed, Kapidzic and Herring (2015) found that about half of the teenage girls in their study had profile photos on a popular chat site where they were wearing revealing clothing or were only partially dressed. On the other hand, an analysis of profile photos on MySpace revealed relatively low rates of self-sexualization (Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012), as did an analysis of Facebook profile photos (Ruckel & Hill, 2017). Furthermore, newer social media sites have since emerged; for example, Instagram has a singular emphasis on photo sharing and therefore may promote more self-sexualization.

Regardless of how common it is to post sexualized photos on social media, doing so may come with costs. One experiment found that a young woman with a sexualized profile photograph on Facebook was viewed as less attractive and less competent by other young women compared to when she had a nonsexualized profile photograph (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). Furthermore, focus groups with young men found that they were more likely to expect sexual relations from

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a woman who had posted sexualized photos on Facebook, though they were less interested in pursuing a relationship with her (Moreno, Swanson, Royer, & Roberts, 2011).

Given these potentially negative consequences, it is important to understand women's motivations behind posting self-sexualized photos. Sales' (2016) interviews with girls and young women revealed that a desire for attention may be the motivation. Attention is manifested through "likes" and comments on social media, and one recent study has found that these are particularly potent forms of social feedback. Using fMRI methodology, adolescents who viewed photos with a lot of "likes" showed greater activity in the regions of the brain associated with reward processing and attention (Sherman, Payton, Hernandez, Greenfield, & Dapretto, 2016). Thus, receiving more "likes" could be a particularly powerful motivator for social media behavior.

Sexualized photos on social media may be particularly likely to garner positive social feedback because of our culture of objectification of women, wherein women are frequently portrayed as objects and their self-worth is depicted through their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008). These images are pervasive throughout the media (e.g., Conley & Ramsey, 2011), which could encourage women to post similar photos of themselves. Indeed, one experiment found that women tended to self-objectify when writing a self-description for an online profile that would be viewed by others, but only when they had first been primed with sexually objectifying stimuli (deVries & Peter, 2013). Another study found that women with higher rates of self-objectification and those who staked their self-worth in their appearance were more likely to post sexualized Facebook profile photographs (Ruckel & Hill, 2017). These studies suggest that the culture of objectification may translate to social media.

Self-objectification has been linked to many negative consequences, such as shame, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, sexual dysfunction, reduced sexual agency, and increased sexual victimization (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015). Despite these negative consequences, some women seem to enjoy sexualization, in part because it gives them a sense of empowerment (Erchull & Liss, 2013; Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011). For example, Moor (2010) found that women were motivated to wear revealing clothing because they wanted to feel attractive and desired, even though they did not want to signal interest in sex. Although images of women actively encouraging sexualized attention may seem empowering, some researchers believe they may simply represent another form of social control over women and their sexuality (Gill, 2008). Indeed, enjoying sexualization is associated with increased self-objectification and objectification from others (Liss et al., 2011; Ramsey, Marotta, & Hoyt, 2017), which motivates researchers to better understand the phenomenon of self-sexualization.

The present study explores four primary research questions. First, to what extent do young women post self-sexualized photos on Instagram and Facebook? Second, do self-sexualized photos on social media garner positive feedback in the form of "likes" and friends/followers? Third, what individual differences predict which women post self-sexualized photos on social media? We examined a number of different individual differences, including body surveillance (i.e., taking a third-person perspective of your own body, which is a symptom of self-objectification; McKinley & Hyde, 1996), self-objectification, enjoying sexualization, viewing sex as a source of power, staking one's self-worth in likes/comments on social media, and desiring attention on social media. Finally, to what extent does posting self-sexualized photos on social media actually relate to feelings of sexual agency (i.e., control over one's own sexuality)?

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 61$; $M_{age} = 19.23$, $SD = 1.15$) were recruited through a psychology department participant pool. The criteria for enrollment in this study were that participants must be female, 18 years or older, and have a Facebook and/or Instagram account. Most participants were White (79%), but 8% were Latina, 5% were African American, 3% were Asian/Asian American, 3% were multiracial, and 2% identified as something other than the categories listed. Most participants identified as middle class (66%), though 20% were working class, 13% were upper-middle class, and 2% were in poverty. Most participants were heterosexual (87%), though 7% were bisexual, 2% were lesbian, and 5% preferred not to disclose.

The sample size was determined by the logistics of the project (e.g., timing of the project and availability of participants). A sensitivity analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) revealed that this sample size allows us to detect statistical significance with 80% power for bivariate correlations greater than or equal to 0.31. Thus, medium- and large-sized effects could be detected in this study.

1.2. Procedure

After providing consent, participants were asked to log into their social media accounts (Instagram and/or Facebook). Once logged in, the participant informed the researcher how many friends/followers they had on each site. Next, participants were given an instruction sheet on how to take screenshots of the ten most recent photos posted of themselves. To be selected, the photo had to (1) include the participant and (2) have been uploaded to the social media account by the participant herself. Once the participants had saved the screenshots to the computer, they were moved to another computer where they completed the survey measures via Qualtrics. In the meantime, the researcher removed any possible information that can be linked back to the participant, such as their username, as well as erased any other person in the photo besides the participant, in order to comply with IRB restrictions. The researcher also recorded how many "likes" each photo had.

1.3. Survey measures

1.3.1. Body surveillance

To assess the extent to which women take a third-person perspective of their own bodies, participants completed the surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Participants responded to 8 items such as "during the day, I think about how I look many times" ($\alpha = 0.82$) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

1.3.2. Self-objectification

To assess self-objectification, participants completed the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Participants ranked 10 attributes according to their impact on their personal self-concept. This measure compared how they rank attributes pertaining to how their bodies look (e.g., "weight") vs. how their bodies function (e.g., "health"). Responses ranged from 1 (being most important) to 10 (being least important).

1.3.3. Enjoyment of sexualization

To assess the extent to which women enjoy being sexualized by men, participants completed the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (Liss et al., 2011). This was an 8-item scale with statements such as "I want men to look at me" ($\alpha = 0.84$). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

1.3.4. Sex as a source of power

Participants completed the Sex is Power scale (Erchull & Liss, 2013), which is a 13-item scale that assessed the extent to which women believe that they gain power over men through their sexuality. Statements included "If a man is attracted to me, I can usually get him to do what I want him to do" ($\alpha = 0.89$). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

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