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## Research Article

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# Abstract

While many researchers examined several harmful consequences of the imposed or forced sexualization of women, still little is known about voluntary self-sexualization and its potential effects on women who engage in the practice. Although the idea that self-sexualization is self-fulfilling remains contentious, women who self-sexualize are naturally expected to receive sexualized attention, including unwanted attention. This study starts with the question of whether self-sexualizing women, including those who use self-sexualization as a source of power, experience sexual objectification, measured by nonphysical sexual harassment, and its negative consequence, measured by body shame. Furthermore, we investigate how age moderates the relationship. An online questionnaire was created and a total of 308 women completed the questionnaire. Structural equation modeling was conducted to test the hypothesized causal relationships from self-sexualization (self-empowering sexualization and no-power-intent self-sexualization) to nonphysical sexual harassment, which can lead to body shame. The results showed that the effects of self-sexualization are dependent on the intent for self-sexualization as well as the self-sexualizer's age. While self-sexualization without intent to gain power can lead to increased sexual harassment incidents and body shame, mature women's self-sexualization as a source of power does not lead to increased sexual harassment experiences nor increased body shame. However, unlike the mature women's self-empowering sexualization, the young women's self-sexualization, with or without intent to gain power, can lead to more sexual harassment experiences. The findings of this study indicate the need to uncover the various intentions for self-sexualization as well as their different effects.

# Introduction

In 2014, a social movement organization called Hollaback created a social experiment video of a woman walking around New York City for 10 hours that went viral. The video creator hired an actress to wear a black crewneck t-shirt and jeans and walk silently around the city and observe the scene. During her walk, she received countless winks and stares and was urged to smile, equated with a thousand dollars, and called "sexy," "beautiful," "sweetie," "darling," "miss," "girl," "baby," and "mami." Furthermore, a random man walked silently beside her for five minutes, whereas other men attempted to initiate conversation. In an interview, the video creator explained that he deliberately chose the outfit to debunk the misconception that women get harassed because of their revealing outfits (Butler, 2014).

Belonging to a culture in which the female body is commonly objectified, many women experience various forms of sexual objectification (e.g., being stared at in a sexual manner or touched against their will) daily. The indirect and subtle experience of sexual objectification through the media seems inevitable because of its prevalence. Scholars and journalists acknowledged this issue, which raises concerns about its negative physical, mental, and social consequences for women and society. Simultaneously, social movements emerged to address the problem of female sexualization, such as the SlutWalk and MeToo movements.

Although the sexual objectification of women has been criticized collectively as well as the harm it can inflict, in the current highly sexualized Western culture, the active and voluntary display of one's sexuality or sexual body parts is often positively viewed as a sign of women's liberation and empowerment. Some women voluntarily and willingly sexualize themselves (hereinafter, self-sexualization; Choi & DeLong, 2019) for self-fulfillment, such as to gain popularity and/or power, have fun, and feel excitement. Although the idea that such reasons are self-fulfilling remains contentious, women who self-sexualize are naturally expected to receive sexualized attention, including unwanted attention. Thus, the following questions emerged: Do women who voluntarily and actively present themselves sexually (e.g., wearing revealing clothing and posting sexualized selfies) experience similar degrees of sexual objectification as well as its negative consequences? Do women who use their sexuality as a source of power, empowering themselves through self-sexualization, also experience similar degrees of sexual objectification as well as its negative consequences? Despite their intentional self-sexualization for their own benefit, do such women experience the negative consequences of sexual objectification experiences?

Some studies approached self-sexualization as a type of internalization or endorsement of sexual objectification and viewed it as an outcome of sexual objectification experiences, such as exposure to sexualized media. Thus, self-sexualization is a manifestation of well-internalized (or cultivated) sexualization (e.g., McKenney & Bigler, 2010; Ward et al., 2016). The famous objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) also has a similar foundation, that is, women's self-objectification (i.e., seeing oneself as an object, leading oneself to observe one's body through the eyes of another person) is an outcome of their internalized sexually objectified experiences. However, self-sexualization as a possible antecedent of sexual objectification experiences deserves exploration. Despite the growing number of studies on self-sexualization, only a few explored the relationship between self-sexualization and sexual objectification experience and its effect.

Specifically, considering the power dynamics in the relationship between the offenders and receivers of sexual objectification (in which offenders reduce their victims to an object to take advantage; Nussbaum, 1995), women who intentionally use their sexuality as a source of power may not fall into the low-power victim category, whom offenders can dominate or control. Such women have clear intentions to gain power when self-sexualizing (Erchull & Liss, 2013) and empowering themselves through self-sexualization. Accordingly, in this study, we separate self-empowering sexualization from regular self-sexualization without intent to gain power and explore the differences in women's sexually objectified experiences as well as their negative consequences. In addition, among various types of sexual objectification experiences, we choose everyday interpersonal sexual harassment, as a direct form of sexual objectification (vs. an indirect form, such as media influence) and the most common form of sexual aggression (Pina et al., 2009). Furthermore, as a negative consequence of sexual harassment, we select body shame, as a gateway to other severe outcomes, such as depressive symptoms (Hyde & Mezulis, 2020) and eating disorders (Mustapic et al., 2016). Accordingly, we explore the relationship between self-sexualization (self-empowering sexualization and no-power-intent self-sexualization) and sexual harassment, which can lead to body shame. Furthermore, we investigate how age moderates the relationship between self-sexualization, sexual harassment, and its negative consequence.

# Literature Review

## Sexual Harassment as Sexual Objectification

Female body objectification has been a topic of interest for a long time. Sexual objectification occurs when “a woman’s sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Bartky, 1990, p. 35). Sexual objectification is a form of human objectification involving the degradation of a human being to a physical object (Nussbaum, 1995), specifically, a sexual object. Sexual objectification has two aspects: (1) the detachment of sexual parts or functions from a person and (2) the instrumentality or representability of the sexual parts or functions of a person. The degradation of a human being to an object serves as the foundation for victimization. When a body is treated as a physical object, it can be used as a tool for another’s sexual purpose, either for decorative visual interest or for sexual arousal. In addition, when a person is degraded to the level of a body part, as if the body part alone can represent the person, that body part has the most value, even to the exclusion of the other characteristics of the individual.

An individual can experience sexual objectification directly or indirectly in various forms. Direct sexual objectification involves interpersonal interaction and often includes violence, which may or may not involve physical contact (e.g., verbal or written sexual remarks and sexual staring). Direct interpersonal sexual objectification can be placed on a continuum, varying in severity or intensity, and can occur at any point in a person’s life, from childhood to adulthood (e.g., child trafficking and sexual abuse in marriage). An individual can also indirectly experience sexual objectification. An indirect sexual objectification experience occurs when an individual comes into contact with sexual objectification without interpersonal interaction. Indirect sexual objectification can occur through a range of agents. For example, individuals can experience indirect sexualization by watching a music video of an individual being portrayed as a decorative sexual object or beer advertisement displaying a female body as a beer bottle. This concept also includes indirect exposure to sexual objectification as a bystander, which is called ambient sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Schneider, 1996).

Among various types of sexual objectification, sexual harassment is the most prevalent form of sexual aggression (Pina et al., 2009). Sexual harassment is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature” (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2019). The term “sexual harassment” is typically used in work and school settings (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), but sexual harassment can occur in any situation and setting. When sexual harassment occurs between strangers in public (e.g., streets, stores, or bars), it is called street harassment or stranger harassment (Bowman, 1993) as well as public harassment, everyday sexism, and uncivil attention (Logan, 2015). Regardless of the setting of the violent act, sexual harassment can cause psychological, occupational, and physical harm, such as low self-esteem (Malik et al., 2014), self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), body shame (Lindberg et al., 2007), and eating disorders (Hayes et al., 2021).

Public and research attention was paid mostly to workplace sexual harassment and physical forms of sexual violence, but nonphysical sexual harassment (Gervasio & Ruckdeschel, 1992; Logan, 2015) has been largely overlooked. Nonphysical sexual harassment is more common than physical harassment (O'Donohue et al., 1998) to the point that it has become a normal part of everyday life, even among children (Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Hlavka, 2014; Robinson, 2005). This type of harassment may not lead to negative consequences immediately after its occurrence, but similar to a "dripping tap," it can be perpetuated in the victim's consciousness in ordinary life through daily repetition (p. 114). In this study, we explore nonphysical sexual harassment by strangers and acquaintances in relation to self-sexualization.

## **Self-sexualization and Consequences**

The difference between sexual objectification and self-sexualization is the presence of agency. While sexual objectification is imposed sexualization on a woman by others, self-sexualization occurs when a woman voluntarily treats herself as a sexual object (American Psychological Association, 2007; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). The promotion of one's sexual attractiveness, specifically in romantic interactions, is not new; however, the widespread popularity of active self-sexualization in the public sphere has attracted attention as a topic of interest. For instance, McNair (2002) called the cultural trend of the democratization of sexual self-exhibition and exposure as "striptease culture." Similarly, Levy (2006) termed the practice of women subjectively becoming sexual objects "raunch culture."

As visually documented in the previously mentioned video, women experience harassment regardless of how they dress. However, women who present themselves in a sexual manner are perceived to experience increased objectification incidents. De Wilde et al. (2021) investigated the interpersonal consequences of self-sexualization and reported that self-sexualizing women are not only perceived to experience more daily objectification but also more likely to be objectified by men. Specifically, the male participants expressed their intention to establish a relationship for intercourse, rather than a long-term relationship, which is a reduction of women to their sexual functions (Bartky, 1990). Stuart and Kurek (2019) presented similar results among self-sexualizing adolescent girls. The authors investigated girls who frequently take sexualized selfies and reported that they tend to experience aggression online. Furthermore, the self-sexualizing girls tend to demonstrate more aggression as well; they were both victims and perpetrators of online aggression.

Acknowledging women who seek and enjoy "sexualized, appearance-based attention from men," Liss et al. (2011) conceptualized the enjoyment of sexualization and determined if it attenuates the negative effects of internalizing objectification experiences (p. 57). The authors observed that enjoyment of sexualization enhances negative effects, specifically, it increases the negative effect of self-objectification (measured by constant body surveillance) on disordered eating behavior. In the study, the authors reported the significant correlation between enjoyment of sexualization and sexual objectification. The women who reported enjoying self-sexualization also reported having increased

sexual objectification encounters, such as unwanted sexual advances and sexual gazes. Similarly, Ramsey et al. (2017) highlighted the negative effect of enjoyment of sexualization on romantic relationships. The women who indicated that they enjoy sexualization felt sexually objectified by their partners, which led to reduced relationship satisfaction.

Researchers who approached self-sexualization in different ways also found unintended consequences. For example, Choi (2021) viewed self-sexualization as holding a narrowly defined standard of physical attractiveness that equates with being sexy and argued that this narrow view of attractiveness can lead to body shame. Moscatelli et al. (2021) explored the effect of self-sexualizing belief (i.e., internalization of sexualized feminine roles, such as believing that women should be sexually appealing to men) and revealed that self-sexualizing belief can lead to greater tolerance of sexual harassment. Based on the aforementioned studies showing the negative effects of self-sexualization, we posit that women who self-sexualize will encounter more sexually objectified experiences, measured by sexual harassment, as well as its negative consequences, measured by feelings of shame for not having a satisfying physical appearance.

### **Power Dynamics in Sexual Harassment and Self-empowering Sexualization**

Although self-sexualizing women may experience more sexual objectification, many women experience sexual harassment despite not presenting themselves in a sexual manner, because sexual objectification is a game played by men for other men (Quinn, 2002) and of abuse of power and disrespect (Kearl, 2010). Sexual harassment is relevant to the subordination of victims' sexuality (Tuerkheimer, 1997), in which perpetrators demonstrate dominance over their victims (Browne, 2006; Palmer & Thornhill, 2003).

Two views exist on the power status of perpetrators. Most scholars claimed that perpetrators have more power and target low-power individuals to assert their power and dominance (e.g., Browne, 2006; Davis, 1994; Tuerkheimer, 1997). However, a recent study (Del Greco et al., 2021) proposed a somewhat different view and argued that perpetrators who perceive themselves as having little power are likely to harass others to obtain power, because individuals who perceive themselves as having strong power feel no need to demonstrate it through harassment. The authors further explained that individuals who perceive themselves as having little power cannot initiate harassment, as their attempts would be unperpetrated. Both views agree on the role of power in sexual harassment.

In relation to power dynamics, the distinct consideration of self-empowering sexualization justifies a separate investigation from that without intent to gain power. The use of self-sexualization as a source of power for one's benefit (Erchull & Liss, 2013), that is, empowerment through self-sexualization, has been acknowledged with disputation. Akin to a double-edged sword, women may be punished for their self-sexualization (e.g., De Wilde et al., 2021; Stuart & Kurek, 2019) or, if successful, receive rewards for being attractive. The perks of being attractive have been well-documented in the hiring process (Cash & Kilcullen, 1985), performance evaluations (Landy & Sigall, 1974), salary grades (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Roszell et al., 1989), success in sales (Reingen & Kernan, 1993), and in receiving help (Benson et al., 1976). Particularly, Hakim (2010) specified erotic capital (e.g., sex appeal and attractiveness) as a

personal asset similar to economic, social, and human capital and encouraged women to invest in and be proactive in capitalizing on their erotic capital to advance in life “from the boardroom to the bedroom” (p. 2).

Accordingly, self-empowering sexualization may have a meaningful influence on sexual harassment for several reasons. As self-empowering sexualization is motivated by power and intent to gain a foothold over men, women who practice it may not be seen as susceptible to being targeted. Perpetrators may also believe that their attempts will not be successful, because self-empowering sexualizers present themselves that they have agency over their sexualization. Therefore, unlike self-sexualization without clear intent, we posit that self-empowering sexualization may not be linked with a greater degree of sexual harassment or body shame. Thus, we propose Hypotheses 1 and 2 to explore the direct effects of the two forms of self-sexualization (i.e., power and non-power-intent self-sexualization) on sexual harassment and body shame. Meanwhile, we propose Hypothesis 3 to examine the effect of sexual harassment on body shame.

Hypothesis 1: Self-empowering sexualization will not increase (a) sexual harassment and (b) body shame.

Hypothesis 2: Non-power self-sexualization will increase (a) sexual harassment and (b) body shame.

Hypothesis 3: Sexual harassment will mediate the effect of self-sexualization on body shame.

### **Role of Age in Sexual Harassment**

Age is a risk factor in sexual harassment (Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020). Many researchers reported frequent sexual harassment experiences among women during their adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Eom et al., 2015; Romito et al., 2019; Romito et al., 2017). Compared with university students, high school students are more tolerant of sexual harassment (Bogart et al., 1992; Foulis & McCabe, 1997) and experience an increase in sexual harassment as they develop physically and begin to initiate romantic and sexual interactions (Petersen & Hyde, 2009). As they age, high school students become more sensitive to and less tolerant of sexual harassment (Foulis & McCabe, 1997). Furthermore, compared with young women, older women are less receptive to sexually toned behaviors (e.g., shoulder squeeze, arm around a shoulder, and winks) and more likely to label such behaviors as harassment (Colarelli & Haaland, 2002).

Although younger women are less sensitive to sexual harassment and more likely to tolerate such experiences than older women, it does not mean that they experience less harassment or are intact from harm. In fact, young women are the most vulnerable group. According to the US nonprofit organization Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), younger women are especially at risk of sexual violence, and sexual assault victims are mostly under the age of 30 years (RAINN, 2022).

In view of the vulnerability of young women, their self-sexualization, including self-empowering sexualization, may lead to high risk of sexual harassment and its negative consequences. Regardless of



their intention to gain power, they are at the highest risk of sexual violence. Moreover, young women's projection of power in their sexualization may not be perceived as empowering or sufficiently powerful because of their young age. According to Arnett (2000), individuals in emerging adulthood, from their late teens through their twenties, are demographically and subjectively distinct such that they are currently exploring their identity and direction in various life possibilities, such as love, work, and worldview. Their intention, through self-sexualization, may not be firmly established, which may lead to a low projection of power. Therefore, we explore the influence of age in the examination of the effects of self-sexualization on sexual harassment and body shame and propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Age will moderate the effects of self-sexualization on (a) sexual harassment and (b) body shame.

## Methods

### Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected from a sample of panel members enrolled in Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowdsourcing platform where panel members can complete a survey for compensation and widely used for online data collection owing to its low cost compared with other research firms (Brandon et al., 2014) and broader reach to diverse populations (Behred et al., 2011; Buhrmester et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2015). Most important, its online anonymous nature increases participants' comfort while reducing pressure to provide socially desirable responses (Shapiro et al., 2013).

From the MTurk site, potential participants read the research invitation, including a brief introduction and a web link to an online survey. When the potential participants clicked on the survey link, a full informed consent page appeared. The participants were required to acknowledge that they read and understood the information on the page and gave their consent to participate in the study. To participate in the study, a participant must be an English-speaking American woman, 18 years of age or older, and have passed the three attention check questions mixed in with the questionnaire items, evaluating her attention to the survey. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

### Measurements

An online questionnaire was created to measure four variables adopted from previous studies. Self-empowering sexualization was assessed with the Sex is Power Scale, which measures an individual's feeling of empowerment by using her sexuality (Erchull & Liss, 2013). A total of five items were scored on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Examples of the scale items include "I use my body to get what I want" and "My sex appeal helps me control men." Non-power self-sexualization was assessed with the Sexualizing Behavior Scale, which measures an individual's intention to engage in sexualizing behaviors (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009). The scale contains 10 activities relevant to sexualizing behaviors (e.g., wearing clothing labeled "porn star" and flashing breasts) mixed in

with 10 activities classified as adventurous (e.g., caving excursions and bungee jumping). A five-point Likert-type scale was used to score the items, ranging from “very likely” to “very unlikely.”

Nonphysical sexual harassment was assessed using the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Experiences Scale, which measures the frequency of nonphysical sexual harassment encounters, such as catcalls, whistles, and unwanted sexual attention (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). A total of five items were scored on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “always” to “never.” Lastly, body shame was assessed using the Body Shame Scale, which measures an individual’s feelings of shame when not satisfied with her body (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). The three scale items were scored on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Examples of the items include “I feel like I must be a bad person when I don’t look as good as I could” and “When I can’t control my weight, I feel like something must be wrong with me.” The participants’ demographic information was collected at the end of the survey.

## Data Analysis

A two-step approach, that is, a measurement and structural model, was used in this study (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM) were conducted using SPSS 27.0 and Amos 27.0. Because the four variables were collected using the Likert-type scale responses and showed non-normal distributions, Spearman’s rho for the correlation analysis, principal axis factor analysis, and the Bayesian approach for the SEM were employed to reduce the possible bias in the estimations.

## Results

### Participants’ Characteristics

From the 604 attempts to answer the survey, a total of 308 usable data remained after eliminating the responses from those who were not women, below the age of 18 years, not American, and non-English speakers, and who failed to pass the three attention check questions. As seen in Table 1, the majority of the participants was Caucasian (69.48%), married (64.29%), received some college education (96.75%), employed full time (75.97%), and had an annual income under \$49,999 (49.68%). The mean age of the participants was 36.28 years, with a standard deviation (SD) of 11.26.

Table 1  
Demographic summary of sample (n = 308)

Variable		Frequency	%
Ethnicity	Caucasian	214	69.48
	Asian	38	12.34
	African American	28	9.09
	Other	28	9.09
Marital status	Married	198	64.29
	Never married	79	25.65
	Other	27	8.76
	No response	4	1.30
Employment	Employed full time	234	75.97
	Employed part time	38	12.34
	Other	32	10.39
	No response	4	1.30
Annual household income	Under \$10,000	23	7.47
	\$10,000–\$24,999	42	13.64
	\$25,000–\$49,999	88	28.57
	\$50,000–\$74,999	83	26.95
	\$75,000–\$99,999	44	14.29
	\$100,000–\$149,999	19	6.17
	\$150,000 or higher	7	2.27
	No response	2	0.65
Education	High school or lower	10	3.25
	Some college	24	7.79
	Two-year degree	20	6.49
	Four-year degree	178	57.79
	Postgraduate degree	76	24.68
Age	Mean = 36.28 years		SD = 11.26

## Measurement Analysis

A satisfactory level of reliability was achieved for all the constructs. The Cronbach's alpha values were above .833, and the composite reliability values were above .836, as shown in Table 2. Convergent and discriminant validity was verified, and the factor loadings were all above .693 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Furthermore, the AVE values were above .631, and the square root of the AVE values was larger than the interconstruct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2  
Results of measurement item analysis

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
Self-empowering sexualization	I can get what I want using my feminine wiles.	.888	.931	.932	.731
	My sex appeal helps me control men.	.873			
	If a man is attracted to me, I can usually get him to do what I want him to do.	.858			
	My sexuality gives me power.	.831			
	I use my body to get what I want.	.824			
Non-power self-sexualization	Flashing your breasts for the Girls Gone Wild videos	.885	.950	.950	.658
	Wearing an item of clothing or having an accessory displaying the Playboy bunny symbol	.862			
	Taking part in a wet T-shirt contest	.852			
	Wearing a T-shirt labeled "porn star"	.842			
	Attending a female nude dance bar with male friends or boyfriend	.815			
	Taking a pole-dancing or strip aerobics class	.812			
	Purchasing a female nude calendar for your boyfriend	.799			
	Dancing provocatively at a dance club with female friends	.781			
	Having breast augmentation surgery for the purpose of increasing your breast size	.753			
	Going on a spring break party vacation	.693			
Nonphysical sexual harassment	Seductive remarks or "come-ons"	.883	.920	.921	.699
	Crude or offensive sexual jokes	.857			
	Sexist remarks or behaviors	.848			
	Catcalls, whistles, or stares	.801			
	Unwanted sexual attention or interaction	.788			

Note:  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
Body shame	When I'm not exercising enough, I question whether I am a good enough person.	.870	.833	.836	.631
	I feel like I must be a bad person when I don't look as good as I could.	.808			
	When I can't control my weight, I feel like something must be wrong with me.	.696			
Note: $\alpha$ = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted					

Table 3  
The square root of AVE values, correlations, and reliability scores

	1	2	3	4
1. Self-empowering sexualization	<b>.855</b>			
2. Non-power self-sexualization	.836***	<b>.811</b>		
3. Nonphysical sexual harassment	.692***	.749***	<b>.836</b>	
4. Body shame	.546***	.567***	.547***	<b>.794</b>
Note: Diagonal elements are the square root of AVE values; numbers below diagonals are correlations ***Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed)				

## Structure Model Analysis

Structural model analysis was conducted using the Bayesian approach, with 1,000 samples for bootstrapping. The results of the Bollen–Stine bootstrap method supported the appropriateness of the model to the data ( $p = .145$ ; Bollen & Stine, 1992; Kim & Millsap, 2014). The results of the CFA also supported the measurement, showing a satisfactory fit:  $\chi^2 = 310.487$  ( $df = 213$ ,  $p = .000$ ), normed  $\chi^2 = 1.458$ , RMSEA = .039, GFI = .919, CFI = .984, NFI = .950, and TLI = .981. The standardized residual covariance between all the measurement items was less than |2|.

As shown in Fig. 1, the results of the SEM revealed that the paths from self-empowering sexualization to harassment ( $\beta = .120$ ,  $p = .243$ ) and body shame ( $\beta = .086$ ,  $p = .507$ ) were not significant, thereby supporting Hypotheses 1 (a) and (b). However, the paths from non-power self-sexualization to sexual harassment ( $\beta = .691$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and body shame ( $\beta = .265$ ,  $p < .10$ ) were significant, thereby supporting Hypotheses 2 (a) and (b). Finally, the path from sexual harassment to body shame was significant ( $\beta = .338$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thereby supporting Hypothesis 3. As presented in Table 4, the bias-corrected 95%

confidence interval of the indirect effect showed that sexual harassment significantly mediated the relationship between non-power self-sexualization and body shame.

Table 4  
Total, direct, and indirect effects of non-power self-sexualization on body shame

	<b>Exogenous Variable</b>	<b>Endogenous Variable</b>	<b>Total Effect</b>	<b>Direct Effect</b>	<b>Indirect Effect</b>
Overall	Non-power self-sexualization	Body shame	.499	.265	.234

To explore the influence of age, the participants were categorized into two groups: a young group composed of women up to 30 years of age ( $n = 123$ , mean = 26.42, SD = 2.62) and a mature group composed of women older than 30 years ( $n = 185$ , mean = 42.84, SD = 9.94). The chi-square difference of the paths between the two groups showed that statistically significant differences existed in the path from self-empowering sexualization to sexual harassment, from self-empowering sexualization to body shame, and from sexual harassment to body shame. Between the two groups, no statistically significant differences were observed in the paths from non-power self-sexualization to sexual harassment and to body shame (Fig. 2). The results partially supported Hypothesis 4, stating that age moderates the effects of self-empowering sexualization on (a) sexual harassment and (b) body shame.

For the young group, the paths from self-empowering sexualization to sexual harassment ( $\beta = .331$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and to body shame ( $\beta = .474$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significant, and non-power self-sexualization led to sexual harassment ( $\beta = .498$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although the p-value of the path between non-power self-sexualization to body shame was slightly above the 90% confidence interval ( $\beta = .311$ ,  $p = .103$ ), it may indicate some level of evidence of the significance. Interestingly, the path between sexual harassment and body shame was not significant ( $\beta = -.172$ ,  $p = .290$ ). For the mature group, the significant paths were from non-power self-sexualization to sexual harassment ( $\beta = .868$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and from sexual harassment to body shame ( $\beta = .525$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

Researchers examined several harmful consequences of the imposed or forced sexualization of women, but still little is known about voluntary self-sexualization and its potential effects on women who engage in the practice. The continued exploration of self-sexualization is a timely response to the growing concern about young women's engagement in self-sexualization (e.g., sexting and posting sexualized selfies online) and victimization (Crofts et al., 2015; Lunde & Joleby, 2022). Accordingly, this study contributes to the extension of the literature on self-sexualization by assessing the direct association between self-sexualization and sexual harassment, which may lead to body shame.

This study starts with the question of whether self-sexualizing women, including those who use self-sexualization as a source of power, experience sexual objectification and its negative consequences. The

findings of this study provide a degree of resolution to the contentious idea about self-sexualization by showing that not all the self-sexualizing women experience the negative consequence of sexually objectified experiences. The consequence, measured by nonphysical sexual harassment, leading to body shame, is dependent on the intent for self-sexualization as well as the self-sexualizer's age. While self-sexualization without intent to gain power can lead to increased sexual harassment incidents and body shame, as shown in previous studies (e.g., Choi, 2021; De Wilde et al., 2021; Ramsey et al., 2017; Stuart & Kurek, 2019), the mature women's self-sexualization as a source of power does not lead to increased sexual harassment experiences nor increases body shame. However, unlike the mature women's self-empowering sexualization, the young women's self-sexualization, with or without intent to gain power, can lead to more sexual harassment experiences.

The distinguished effect of self-empowering sexualization from that of non-power self-sexualization can be explained by the power dynamics in sexual harassment. As sexual harassment is about power and control (Kearl, 2010), the mature women's self-empowering sexualization may not fit the image of potential low-power victims, whom perpetrators can target easily. As such women hold power and manipulate sexual tensions to gain power, their self-sexualization is on their terms. However, when self-empowering sexualization is practiced by the young women, it increases the probability of victimization on top of the high rate of sexual harassment, thereby verifying the vulnerability of young women to sexual harassment as well as to the negative impact of victimization (e.g., Eom et al., 2015; Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020; Romito et al., 2016). The projection of power may also appear differently by age, that is, young women's self-empowering sexualization is not perceived as powerful and may be ignored because of their young age. Furthermore, particularly in the case of street harassment, as a game played specifically by men for other men (Quinn, 2002), male perpetrators may prefer young women as their game target for peer approval as well as to avoid embarrassment from potential retaliation or confrontation.

Despite the strong support of previous studies on the harm caused by sexual harassment (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hayes et al., 2021; Lindberg et al., 2007), in this study, we find no significant path from sexual harassment to body shame, thereby indicating the absence of the indirect effect of self-sexualization on body shame through sexual harassment among the young women. Instead, we observe the direct effect of self-empowering sexualization on body shame. In the case of non-power self-sexualization, its effect on body shame is marginally nonsignificant ( $p = .103$ ), which may also indicate that non-power self-sexualization can lead directly to body shame. In other words, the young women who self-sexualize reported experiencing a high degree of sexual harassment, but such sexual harassment incidents do not lead to body shame. We obtain this outcome perhaps because individual differences can account for the varying responses toward harassment (Fairchild, 2010), and the young women's reaction to nonphysical sexual harassment from their self-sexualization may be relevant to factors other than their feelings of shame toward their body.

One possibility is that they may respond positively to nonphysical sexual harassment resulting from self-sexualization. Although research has yet to examine the age factor, some evidence suggests that some



women deem nonphysical harassment (e.g., catcalling, whistles, and stares) as a compliment and enjoy the attention (Fairchild, 2010; Grossman, 2008; Sue, 2010). When women intentionally display their sexuality, men's sexualized attention may be interpreted as a sign of success of their sexual presentation. The likelihood of feeling complimented increases if the perpetrators are young and attractive (Larocca & Kromrey, 1999; Fairchild, 2010).

Another possibility is that the young women's response to sexual harassment is another type of negative response, such as anger or contempt toward the perpetrator. According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1986; 2018), when people seek to understand the reasons behind an event or behavior, they will attribute it to an individual's internal quality (dispositional attribution) and to an external situation outside of the individual (situational attribution). When women attribute sexual harassment to their self-sexualization, they will likely internalize the issue (self-blame; Adhikari & Husain, 2021), which can lead to body shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Shepherd, 2019). However, when women attribute sexual harassment to a situation or perpetrator, they will likely externalize the issue (other blame) and experience other-blaming emotions such as contempt, anger, and disgust (Rozin et al., 1999). If the young women tend to account for situational attribution more than dispositional attribution, then the nonsignificant path between sexual harassment and body shame in relation to self-sexualization can be explained. However, such an interpretation should be performed with caution, that is, it may be limited to only nonphysical sexual harassment and requires further investigation in terms of the influence of age.

## Limitations And Future Studies

Regardless of how women use or communicate their sexuality, no woman has ever *asked for* its negative consequences. However, in a society in which the female body is objectified, self-sexualization without clear intent to gain power may increase the risk of unintended effects, such as sexual harassment and body shame. The findings of this study indicate the need to uncover the various intentions for self-sexualization as well as their different effects.

Evident in the significant moderating effect of age, consideration of the age factor in self-sexualization is required for future studies. Specifically, the influence of age on the acceptance of sexual harassment as a compliment can be explored. Through attribution theory, understanding the role of age using attribution theory (self-blame vs other-blame) can also deepen our understanding of the interpretation of self-sexualization effects.

We acknowledge that our study illustrates only a fraction of the complicated nature of sexuality and human interactions. We explore nonphysical sexual harassment and body shame as effects of self-sexualization. Future studies may explore other forms of sexual objectification as well as health outcomes to further understand self-sexualization as an antecedent. Furthermore, we focus only on adult women. As sexual objectification can occur to any gender, future studies may investigate individuals from diverse demographic groups.

# Statements And Declarations

Competing interests: All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions: D.C. and H.L. contributed to the study conceptualization and design, data collection, and data analysis. D.C. wrote the manuscript with support from H.L., J.K., and J.L.

Ethics approval: The study was carried out after permission to use human subjects in the research was received from the Old Dominion University review board [1893233-1].

Consent to participate: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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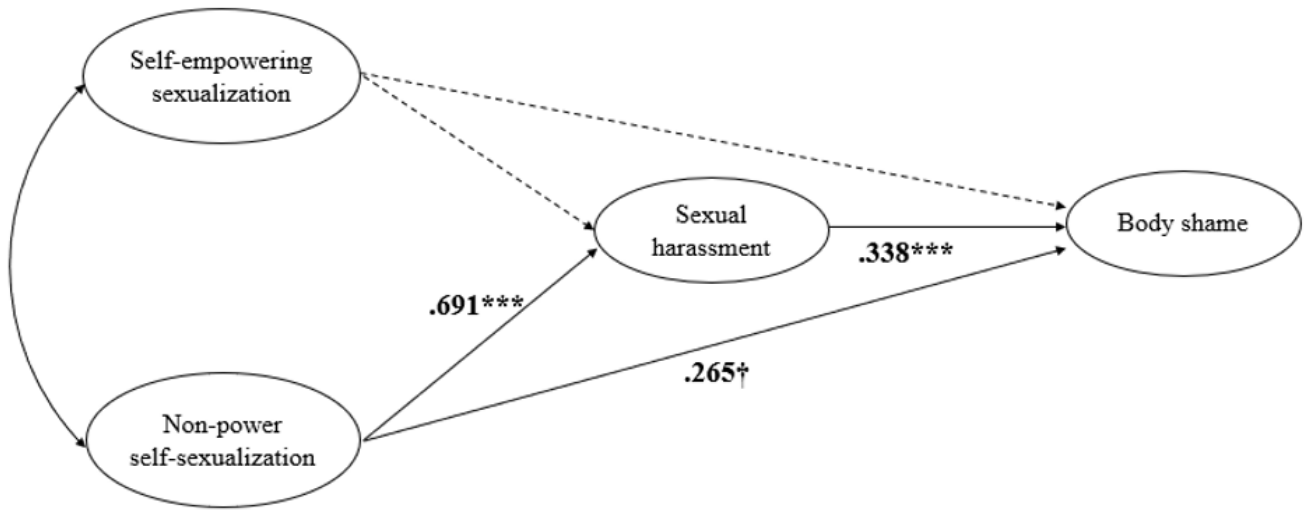
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## Figures

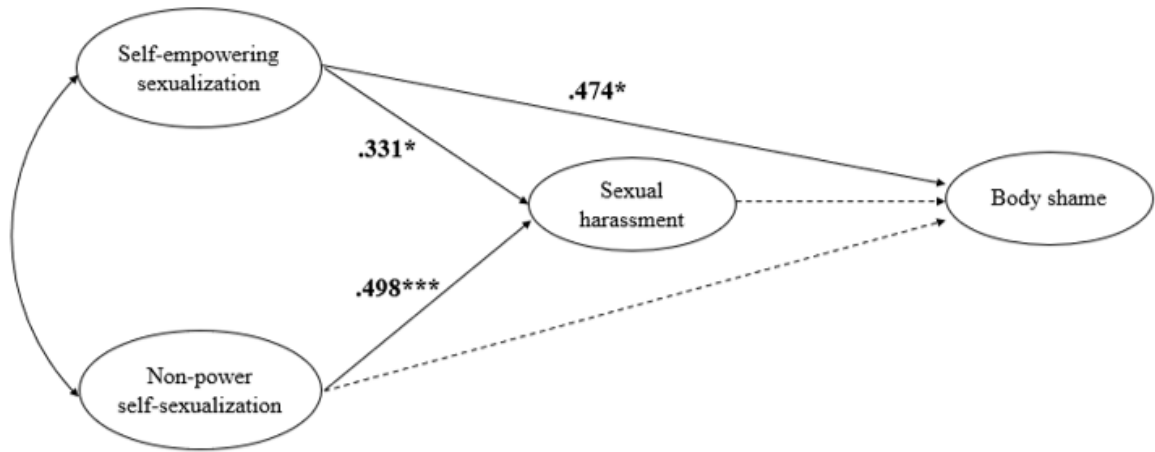


**Figure 1**

Results of path analysis

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$  and † $p < .10$

Young group (up to 30 years of age; n = 123, mean = 26.42, SD = 2.62)



Mature group (over 30 years of age; n = 185, mean = 42.84, SD = 9.94)



Figure 2

Path comparison between young and mature groups

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .10$