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## Adolescent girls' use of social media for challenging sexualization

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### ABSTRACT

Research on sexualized media content has largely neglected an important part of young people's interactions with such content, namely whether and how young people are able to resist sexualization in the media and build resilience against its influence. This study is one of the first to investigate whether adolescent girls build such resilience by reading and sharing messages (e.g., videos, articles) on social media in which sexualization is criticized (i.e., counter-messages). A focus group study of 24 girls aged 12–17, showed that girls engage very little with counter-messages in social media. Explanations for this lack of engagement are related to uses and gratifications of social media (e.g., hedonic and utilitarian value), social influence processes (e.g., identification and compliance with social norms) and media literacy skills (e.g., perceived susceptibility to and awareness of sexualization).

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## Introduction

Over the last decades, research has accumulated on the potential negative consequences of exposure to sexualized media content for adolescents' sexual behavior, attitudes and self-concept, especially among adolescent girls (Karsay et al., 2018; Shafer et al., 2013; Slater & Tiggemann, 2016; Ward, 2016; Ward et al., 2013; Zurbriggen et al., 2010). However, while such research is crucial, this one-sided negative perspective neglects an important part of adolescent girls' interactions with the media, namely whether they are capable of arguing against the sexualized messages they encounter in the media. Moreover, while some studies have shown that adolescents are capable of criticizing sexualization in the media (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Gill, 2012), research has hardly focused on the question of how the internet, and social media in particular, may help adolescent girls to build their resilience to sexualization in the media. One way that they may do so is by sharing messages on social media, in which their critical opinions on sexualization are expressed (i.e., counter-messages).

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Presently, there is some initial evidence that social media are used to counter stereotypical or societally dominant messages (Albury, 2015; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; Ringrose & Mendes, 2018; Salter, 2013; Sills et al., 2016; Stack & Kelly, 2006). However, apart from literature on counter-discourses in relation to sexual harassment and violence (Powell, 2015; Salter, 2013; Sills et al., 2016) or feminist activism (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018; Travers, 2003), research has hardly focused on how young (adolescent) women may criticize sexualized media content, and is lacking on how social media is used herein. This is, on the one hand, surprising because social media offer numerous platforms where counter-messages are shared and discussed. For instance, the Media Education Foundation distributes videos on their YouTube channel on topics such as the sexual objectification of women. Such videos have a high potential of reaching young people on social media, given that the sharing of videos occurs often on social media platforms (Pew, 2013). On the other hand, given girls' inconsistent criticism of sexualization in previous research (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016), and their internalization of mainstream sexualization (Attwood, 2009; Bobkowski et al., 2016; Ward, 2016), it remains to be seen if girls are using social media to criticize sexualization. To gain more insight on this issue, the present study will focus on the question of whether, how and why adolescent girls engage with messages in social media to counter sexualized content in the media.

### ***Adolescent girls' engagement with and susceptibility to sexualization***

Previous research has mostly focused on adolescent girls' engagement with, and susceptibility to, sexualization in mainstream media, and to some extent social media. Sexualization refers to a situation where "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person" (Zurbriggen et al., 2010, p. 1). In terms of media content, sexualized media content refers to content or images where individuals, especially women, are portrayed as sex objects by emphasizing their body parts and sexual willingness or availability (Attwood, 2009; Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Ward et al., 2016). Such images reinforce the message that women should be first and foremost judged on their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Research has shown that sexualization in the media, and young people's internalization of such sexualization, can have negative consequences, such as increased depression and self-objectification, and decreased self-esteem and body satisfaction, especially among girls (Ward, 2016; Zurbriggen et al., 2010).

More importantly, research has increasingly focused on the importance of social media as a platform for the proliferation of sexualized images, and young girls' internalization of sexualization (Bobkowski et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2012; Ringrose, 2010, 2011). Social media are highly popular among adolescents and an important tool for identity exploration and expression (Lenhart et al., 2010; Ringrose, 2010, 2011). The internalization and application of sexualization in social media can increase the value that girls attach to being sexy and attractive, both for

themselves and others (Albury, 2015; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Mascheroni et al., 2015; van Oosten et al., 2018; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016).

### ***Challenging sexualization in social media***

In contrast to the vast amount of research on the occurrence, and consequences, of sexualization in social media, research on how sexualization is *resisted* in social media is scarce. Social media can be used by girls and young women as platforms to voice their opinion and resist sexualization in the media (Burns & Eaton, 2016; Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018), given their function as a place to create and explore “possible selves” and identity. This is particularly important because the identity that girls portray online can feed back into their self-concepts (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Valentine & Holloway, 2002). Thus, when girls resist sexualization online, they may be more capable of resisting sexualization in their offline lives as well. A substantial amount of research has focused on girls’ and young women’s fight against rape culture and sexual harassment on social media (Bogen et al., 2019; Garcia & Vemuri, 2017; Hart & Mitchell, 2015; Rentschler, 2014; Salter, 2013; Sills et al., 2016). However, much less research has focused specifically on girls’ resistance to sexualized media content.

The few studies that did look at how social media can be used in challenging sexualization suggest that such resistance does occur. Recently, for instance, online movements and communities that fight everyday sexism have attracted girls from a wide age range (13–22 years) and different socioeconomic classes and residential areas (Burns & Eaton, 2016). One specific way in which young girls challenge mainstream stereotypical content is through “culture jamming,” which consists in creating and deconstructing mainstream popular media culture, for instance by making parodies of existing media (e.g., advertisement) and as such exposing underlying harmful messages (Burns & Eaton, 2016; Harold, 2004). By creating their own online spaces to critique and parody mainstream media, girls fight against sexist depictions of girls and women in the media, and advertisement in particular, and replace thin and passive depictions of women and girls with more balanced and healthy representations (i.e., “Jammer Girls,” Merskin, 2006). Online websites such as About-Face.org teach young girls to resist harmful media messages in a humorous way (Merskin, 2006), and contribute to such resistance by recommending content for their “Gallery of Offenders” and “Gallery of Winners,” and the hashtag #NotBuyingIt helps girls to identify stereotypical advertisements (Burns & Eaton, 2016). Social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumbler are used by young women to ridicule sexism and misogyny (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018). However, despite research on the existence of feminist platforms and online movements, research on what motivates girls to engage with such content specifically, is still scarce.

### ***Motivations for engaging with counter-messages in social media***

Given the lack of research on adolescent girls’ engagement in counter-messages in social media, it is fruitful to derive potential motivations from previous research on engagement with and adoption of social media in general. On the one hand, in line with Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), social media users are aware of their social

and psychological needs and actively seek gratifications from media to satisfy these needs. Research has focused on specific social media gratifications of youth, and in particular adolescent girls and young women, and found that social media use is often driven by intrinsic needs such as self-validation (Perloff, 2014). More specifically, seeking validation, (positive) feedback, and attention, mainly in the form of “likes,” is one of the main motivations to use social media for adolescent girls (Jong & Drummond, 2016). In addition, research on young people’s motivations of visually oriented social media use (i.e., Instagram and Snapchat), showed that such social media use was mostly motivated by personal identity, self-promotion or self-documentation, and surveillance of others (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Relatedly, based on Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985), the perceived value of social media, or of particular content in social media, determines the conscious choice and intention to engage with social media or that content (Al-Debei et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2014; H. Li et al., 2018). Such values can be hedonic (i.e., excitement and entertainment), utilitarian (i.e., information seeking value), media specific (i.e., media appeal) and social (i.e., social interaction, Gan & Li, 2018; H. Li et al., 2018; Zhang, Li, Wu, & Li, 2017).

With regard to using social media to engage in counter-messages, research has recently shown that engagement in online social movements (e.g., #MeToo), is often driven by intrinsic affective needs such as the need to express one’s anger and outrage, and a desire to be heard (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Moreover, social factors such as meaningful resonance with others, mutual recognition and feeling part of a community were also important drivers of counter-messages in social media (Mendes et al., 2019; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019), which hint at the role of social needs put forth by the Uses & Gratifications perspective. However, the social environment, and what other people in one’s environment do or say, can also have a more direct influence on individuals’ engagement with social media, which points to another predictor of social media engagement: social influence processes.

Based on the Social Influence Processes framework (Cheung et al., 2011; Cheung & Lee, 2010; Ifinedo, 2016), and the important role of peers in social media use of teens (Barker, 2009; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Livingstone, 2008), it can be expected that social media users are largely influenced by their social environment and social norms in their online behavior. In social media, three particular social influence processes take place that drive social media engagement, namely *compliance* (i.e., agreeing with others in one’s social group), *internalization* (i.e., accepting behavior that is similar to one’s social value system), and *identification* (i.e., being influenced by others in the same social group, e.g., Barker, 2009; Cheung et al., 2011; Egebark & Ekström, 2018; Ifinedo, 2016). Thus, adolescent girls’ engagement with counter-messages in social media may further depend on their social environment, such as school, peers and parents, and the social value system regarding sexualized media content and the need to criticize such content in social media.

## Method

### Participants

The focus groups took place at a high school in the third largest city of the Netherlands, in the period of April–May 2017. Each focus group consisted of girls who

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the focus groups.

| Group | Number of participants | Age   |
|-------|------------------------|-------|
| 1     | 4                      | 12–13 |
| 2     | 4                      | 15–16 |
| 3     | 5                      | 14–15 |
| 4     | 4                      | 16–17 |
| 5     | 4                      | 15–16 |
| 6     | 4                      | 16–17 |

were in the same year and class, and considered each other as part of the same friend group. This was done to ensure that the girls were able to talk about the rather sensitive topic of sexism and sexual objectification openly and in ways that they would normally talk about these topics with friends. The focus groups were held in a room separated from the part of the school where classrooms were located, ensuring that the focus groups would not be disturbed. The participants were seated next to each other at a round table facing the principle researcher (i.e., the author), who moderated the focus groups. A student assistant was present during the interview to take notes. Both the researcher and student assistant identified as women. The participants were aware that the interviews were video and audio recorded, and gave explicit consent for their participation in the interviews and the recordings of the interviews.

Information about the topic of the research was given to the students ahead of time by the researcher in the form of a face-to-face presentation during class. For participants under the age of 16, active parental consent was obtained before the start of the interview. All participants were offered refreshments and snacks during the focus group conversations and received a €7.50 gift card for participating. The lunch break and gap hours between classes were used to conduct the focus group interviews. In total, 24 girls aged 12–17 participated in 6 different focus groups ( $M = 15.22$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). The number of participants per focus group ranged from 3 to 5, with an average of 4 girls per focus group (Table 1). The youngest girls (in Group 1 and 3) were from mixed level classes, the older girls (Group 2, 4, 5 and 6) were all enrolled in the VWO level. This is the highest level of high school education in the Netherlands and seen as a preparatory level for enrollment in university after high school.

### **Procedure**

A semi-structured interview guide was used to make sure that all focus groups were conducted in a similar fashion. The focus groups started with a short introduction in which the participants could get familiar with the procedure and some general questions about participants' hobbies and social media use. The focus groups consisted of two parts; in part one the participants were presented with sexualized images and in part two the participants were presented with counter-messages challenging sexualized images. In both parts, the participants were asked to reflect on their reactions to such pictures, and if they ever shared such reactions with anyone (i.e., friends, parents, siblings), both online and offline. Subsequently, the researcher probed whether the participants ever encountered any reactions by others toward such images in social media, whether such reactions were positive or negative, how they felt about such positive or negative reactions, if they ever post such positive or negative reactions to

pictures themselves, and if they ever discussed such reactions with anyone online and offline.

### ***Stimulus material***

The sexualized images that the girls were presented with in part one were images of famous influencers, models and artists (i.e., Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, Gigi Hadid) posing in a sexualized way (e.g., scarcely dressed, and with sexy gaze and pose, Hall et al., 2012; Kapidzic & Herring, 2015). In part two, participants were presented with several counter-messages that challenged sexualization, inspired by previous research on such messages (Burns & Eaton, 2016; Harold, 2004; Merskin, 2006). One message included a Facebook post of “About-Face” criticizing sexualization of girls in an advertisement (i.e., a commercial “upskirting” a young girl). Another message challenged the sexual double standard that scarcely dressed men are considered “hot” while scarcely dressed women are considered “sluts.” Finally, a third message challenged the female beauty ideal by showing a drawing of plus-sized women with hair on her legs saying “into myself always.”

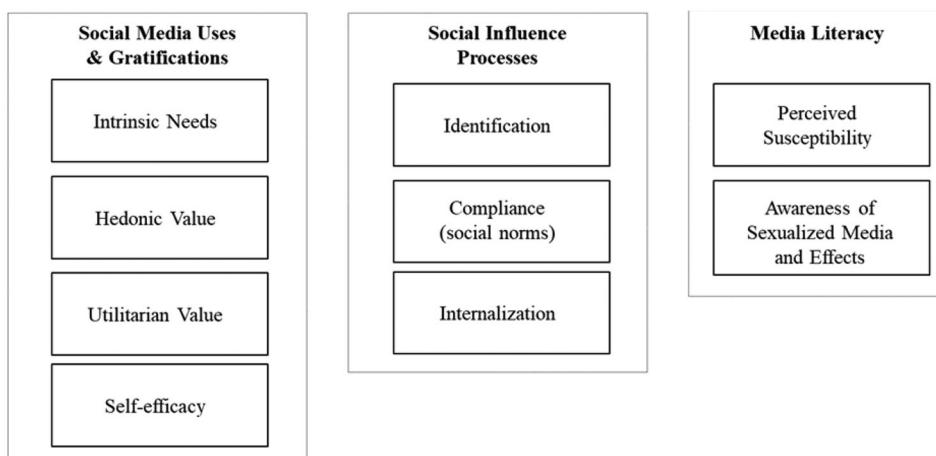
### ***Data preparation and analysis***

All focus group conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants. In order to protect the participants’ anonymity and privacy, the names of the respondents were removed from the transcripts and replaced by numbers (i.e., “P1”; any reactions by the researcher are indicated by “R”). Data were analyzed using Atlas.ti. First, open coding was used to provide every response by the participants with a general code. This resulted in 215 open codes, which were subsequently coded again and categorized according to common themes or meaning. Overlapping codes were merged into one overarching code. The codes were structured according to thematic categories based on sensitizing concepts derived from previous literature. More specifically, codes were organized according to uses and gratifications (e.g., intrinsic needs such as self-expression and self-validation, and social media values such as hedonic or utilitarian values) and social influence processes (e.g., compliance, identification or internalization). Codes that did not match the sensitizing concepts were grouped in new categories. This resulted in a new category, “media literacy” (see Results). Finally, the analyses led to 9 indicators that belonged to 3 overarching themes (Figure 1). The quotations in the results section were translated by the researcher from Dutch into English. They were translated as literally as possible to reflect the language that was used by the respondents. Clarifications or additions by the author are added between brackets: [ ].

## **Results**

### ***Uses and gratifications***

Intrinsic needs as a motivation for sharing counter-messages did not appear much during conversations. More often, however, explanations were given that related to the specific value that social media have for the participants. First of all, findings clearly showed that to



**Figure 1.** Overview of the main themes and sub-indicators.

the participants, social media had a mostly *hedonic value*; content had to be entertaining for them to want to read or watch it. If the participants would engage with counter-messages at all, it was mostly out of boredom, not because they were deliberately searching for such information (example from Group 2):

R: But what you are saying is, there are a few people that are actively engaging with it, but the majority is not really engaging with it [counter-messages]?

P1: Yeah, I also follow some media sites on Facebook, and often they just post funny things, but then also these types of things, also these feminist topics, and sometimes I read those articles. But it depends on how much time I have or how bored I am, then I read it.

An example from group 6:

P2: It's not entertaining, you know. When you are on social media, at least for me, I do not really feel like reading a news post or really something about feminism.

The participants mostly engaged with content that criticized sexual stereotypes when it was funny. For instance, they did share memes that criticized sexualized images, because such content was relatable and not too serious (example from Group 4):

P1: We make jokes about it, but that is, ehm ...

R: Okay.

P1: Like some pictures, they totally go viral. They go ...

R: You mean these type of pictures? [points to a counter-message in a picture]

P1: Well, not really these. For example that one picture of Kim [Kardashian] on that magazine [cover]. That went very viral, and then people made these, ehm, what's it called, things.

P2: Cartoons

P3: Memes

P1: And they go totally viral and then you talk about it, but ...



The *appeal* and *ease* of social media seemed important and active engagement with counter-messages (e.g., commenting and sharing) was often considered too much effort. In a similar vein, the participants seemed to question the *utilitarian value* of social media in relation to counter-messages. Social media is considered a visual platform that is predominantly meant for sharing pictures, and long statements or articles were not considered effective (which also relates to the popularity of memes discussed above). Participants also did not see social media as an effective platform for having discussions about societal topics, given the likelihood of people misunderstanding each other. This utilitarian value of social media also relates to the participants' lack of *perceived self-efficacy* when it comes to sharing counter-messages. They often felt that their opinion online would not influence others (example Group 6):

P2: Social media alone is not going to work, I think. But let's say they talk about it in school, with some kind of seminar you can go to. But it won't do any harm if you try to reach people through social media, but I just think you won't be very successful if you do it alone.

And a similar example from Group 3:

P2: I think anyway that I don't have a lot of influence because I just have a small group of people, so yeah, I won't change the entire world with it. My account is private and yeah, so not everyone can access it.

Most of the participants also made a distinction between themselves or their peers as "normal people," and celebrities, and felt that celebrities were much more effective in spreading counter-messages than they were (example from Group 4):

P1: I think that it basically, you know, is posted on these big accounts. Like for example the Ellen [Degeneres] TvShow. She also posts like these funny things, but when she for example on women's day says something about that, then that account, then she doesn't get tons of negative reactions.

R: Why do you think she can do this?

P1: Well, because she is a sort of, yeah she is very big. I don't really know if people see her as a role model, but she has a lot of influence.

To some extent, they were even counting on celebrities to make critical statements online and considered them their main source of information about societal issues (example from Group 6):

P3: ... I do see it, but always through someone who is already famous. And yeah, I don't know, if you can't even see it in that world. All those celebrities have taken over social media, and all media really. And if they don't do it, we don't see it.

### ***Social influence processes***

By far the majority of the responses by the participants indicated the presence of social influence processes. For instance, in terms of *identification* (i.e., being influenced by others in the same social group), an often given explanation for not engaging in counter-messages was that no one in their social group engaged with such messages. As a result, the participants had little to identify with in terms

of counter-messages in social media. One girl in Group 6, regarded herself as an active feminist and identified with other feminists, and as such engaged with counter-messages in social media. However, even for her it was difficult to find counter-messages online:

P2: Yeah, I don't know, I do see it. Less often than I'd like [...]. I do follow these feminist accounts and things like that, but it is often still sort of censored in a way.

P4: Like you still have to make an effort to see it.

P2: Yeah, and you don't have to make any effort to see this [points to a sexualized picture on the table].

The participants mentioned that they were influenced by their offline friends in what they posted online. Moreover, they were mostly engaging with content posted by their friends, and as such mostly influenced by their own circle. The few examples of counter-messages that the participants could give were of (famous) vloggers or bloggers who challenged beauty ideals by posting "imperfect" or realistic pictures, but they found it difficult to recall seeing any counter-messages challenging sexualization. Especially the younger girls hardly encountered such messages. That said, it is possible that they did not fully grasp the concept of sexualization, or of counter-messages, due to their media literacy, which is further discussed below.

The participants seemed to be very much aware of the *social norms* surrounding "normal" and "accepted" posting behavior among the peer-group they identified with. This also relates to the social influence process of *compliance*, or agreeing with people in your own social group. The risk of not fitting in their social group by posting something that others would not agree with, or being the first to post something "different," is an important reason not to engage in counter-messages in public social media pages. As a result, they were more likely to share any critical views with their friends directly offline, or through more "private" social media channels such as the messaging application "WhatsApp." In this example from Group 4, one participant was afraid that others would think she was a "nag" if she would post critical content:

R: And how do you think people talk about it [counter-messages]?

P: Yeah, I don't really know. But I don't think you get like responses right away. I think you get a sort of judgment. Like that you are a bit of a nag, a bit too much. Looking for attention.

Complying with social norms generally meant that posts on social media needed to be fun and positive, not critical, and as normal as possible as to not come across as forced (example from Group 6):

P4: I have friends who say 'this girl posted a picture with leg hair, how cool!' and then I'm like 'Is that cool?'

P1: Yeah, but then it is forced, that is annoying.

P4: Yeah, exactly.

[...]

R: According to you, what would be a good way to challenge sexism? What is the best way to do this in social media? Or is there no good way to do it in social media?

P3: I think it is very difficult.

P1: I think so too, but I think you should just do it. It is possible but you have to do it in a normal way. Just post a picture and don't go saying things like 'look how cool' or lots of '#feminism' or something. But just post a picture just like you would post a picture of yourself or of the beach. The more normal you make something look like, the better. Because then it eventually becomes normal.

Another important social norm for sharing content in social media that often appeared during conversations was the norm of *authenticity* of self-expression. Posts in social media, including counter-messages, needed to come from people's true interests and match their self-concepts. Participants felt that if they would post counter-messages in social media, it would have come from one's "true self." Relatedly, the participants were aware that the "wrong" type of online behavior, such as breaking the social norm of authentic self-presentation, would be punished (example from Group 4):

When you post a picture that doesn't match that [being a feminist] then you can expect negative responses. [...] That when you are a feminist, people will criticize it and look for something to tell you that you are dumb.

Even the participant that identified as a feminist in Group 6 expressed concern about being seen as a "wrong" type of feminist:

P2: ... then you also experience it as an attack, and I understand that people find that annoying. Because when you feel attacked you think like 'okay, I need to defend myself' and then these terms like 'feminazi' show up and stuff like that and then it is seen as something bad. And then I understand that people find that annoying, you know. Because I also don't like it when I'm called something that I am not.

Finally, in terms of *internalization* of social values (i.e., accepting behavior that is similar to one's social value system), it became clear that resisting sexualization in the media was not part of the participants' social value system, at least when it came to their home environment. Parents sometimes discussed sexualization or showed critical responses toward sexualized images, but often the girls had to bring this up themselves. For instance, in response to the question in what instances parents would talk to them about sexualized images, it was mostly in response to some image on TV, or an image that went viral in social media. Moreover, the participants also often discussed these types of topics with their siblings, rather than with their parents (example from Group 6):

P4: I think mostly when it is on TV. That it appears on TV and when I am there watching it with them then they say 'you will never do this, right?' More like that.

P1: My parents don't do that at all.

P3: I think a bit the same, in my home I often talk about it with my sister. Just about social media, because we think about it in an analytical way. And then it is brought up at the dinner table as well. And then we talk about it, but mostly about the impact that such pictures can have.

### **Media literacy**

Finally, the lack of motivation for engaging in counter-messages could be explained by the participants' media-literacy, in terms of their perceived susceptibility to

negative effects of sexualized media content. When asked why they did not engage with counter-messages, the participants often responded in a way of saying “we already know media messages are fake.” The participants did show high levels of media knowledge, but mostly in terms of awareness of idealized body ideals in the media and the lack of realism of such messages (e.g., use of photoshop). Many of the discussions about counter-messages seemed to automatically turn toward challenging body ideals. Moreover, the participants demonstrated a “third-person effect hypothesis”: they felt that other girls were influenced by such body ideals, but not them (example from Group 6):

P2: . but the Kardashians and Kylie Jenner. I don't get the idea that they are seen as role models. I follow all the Kardashians, but also Emma Watson. And I think Emma Watson is much more of a role model. The Kardashians and Jenners are more like a form of entertainment.

P1: Yeah, exactly.

[...]

P4: No, for some girls they are [role models]. We are of course in the more intellectual part of the Netherlands [laughter]. We are of course in VWO [highest school level] and care about totally different things and are pretty well educated. We can maybe see like this is not how I want to be, this is how I do want to be, this is real, this maybe not. But you have to realize that someone else may not realize that maybe this is not real or a bit forced. They will think like ‘okay that is fun, she gets a lot of attention. I want attention too. I want to feel beautiful too, so I will do that’.

At the same time, they showed little awareness of sexual objectification or the sexual double standard in the media, although this awareness was somewhat more present amongst the older participants (16 and 17 year olds, example from Group 4):

What I notice is that for women, if she posts like a picture like this [sexualized], people immediately think like ‘yeah she wants attention. She's a slut and everything’. And for men it is just like totally ‘oh he's so hot!’ I really do see that. You see that a lot.

Some of the older participants also mentioned that they did not take sexualized images in the media too seriously, which is also shown by their engagement with memes as discussed above. Given the lack of awareness of the effects of sexualized messages, and knowledge about the effects that such messages may have on themselves, it is perhaps not surprising that the participants did not feel the need to post counter-messages about such topics. Especially the younger participants (12–13 years old) seemed hardly aware of the concept of “media influence” or sexualization in the media, and also found it difficult to grasp the idea of a counter-message. In terms of sexualization, they often considered sexualized pictures as “weird” or “dirty,” and were not aware of the implications of sexualized pictures, and thus of the possibility to counter such images. This final example shows that when young adolescent girls were presented with an example of an online counter-message challenging a sexualized advertisement, they focused on the details of the picture (i.e., the brand or the model, or the channel through which it was posted) and not on the broader message that the sexualized picture could convey and that the counter-message tried to challenge (example from Group 1):

P1: Yeah I also understand that for a model it is not entirely her choice. You have to make money as a model. If naked pictures are popular, then you cannot make any money [if you don't take naked pictures]. At one point you just have to.

P3: Yeah and then to also post in on the internet, that's not necessary. You can already see it on TV.

R: What they are really doing here, they are posting it online but actually to say that this advertisement is not okay. That's what the people of AboutFace are saying.

P1: But is this advertisement online as well?

R: Probably, yes.

P3: I think it is okay for TV, but also not okay. It's a bit nasty.

P1: On TV you can flick it away, but in social media you can respond that it is not okay.

R: Yes, that is actually what they are doing here. And you agree with that, if I understand it correctly?

P2: Yeah, it's a good first step.

P1: Yeah, I think it is alright, but also a bit negative. I don't have an opinion about it.

P4: Yeah, I don't know, because I do really like [brand]. I own stuff from them. I just think, the model has to give permission for it.

[...]

P3: I think like, say you really like [brand], then you should not suddenly stop buying their clothes just because there is an advertisement that you think is weird.

P2: Because really, [brand] is popular right now, their clothes and sports tops and stuff. But that is mostly for girls our age, or maybe a bit older. So I don't think this [counter-message] is really helping much.

P3: Say I was a fan of [brand], I would still buy their clothes.

R: But would you be a bit more aware of how these advertisements are made?

P1: You can't do much more than react to it. For some reason I think reacting is a bit too much effort.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate adolescent girls' attitudes toward, and motivations for, engaging with counter-messages in social media, in particular messages countering sexualization of women. In doing so, particular attention was paid to uses and gratifications of social media and the engagement with counter-messages in particular, and how such engagement may further depend on social influence processes. The findings showed that in general, adolescent girls hardly read, shared or commented on, counter-messages in social media. This was largely explained by social influence processes such as identification and compliance (in particular compliance with social norms), and uses and gratifications of social media, in particular the hedonic value of social media. Related to the utilitarian value of social media, the participants had a low sense of self-efficacy in successfully countering stereotypical messages via social media, and were mostly counting on celebrities to do so. Finally, the

findings from this study suggest that adolescent girls' media literacy, in terms of their awareness of effects of sexualized media messages and their perceived susceptibility to such effects, may play a role in their (lack of) engagement with counter-messages. This feeds back into current neoliberal and postfeminist rhetoric, which will be shortly discussed in this paper as well.

### ***The importance of hedonic and utilitarian value of social media***

In the present findings, the hedonic or entertainment value of social media clearly predominated. Engagement with social media posts depended on whether the content was funny, entertaining and could satisfy their need to reduce boredom without too much effort. This seems to be in line with previous research on how young people challenge stereotypical content in mainstream media using parodies (e.g., "culture jamming," Burns & Eaton, 2016; Harold, 2004). Although this, and previous research (Burns & Eaton, 2016; Harold, 2004; Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018), has initially shown the importance of humor in online messages countering sexualization, more research on the use of humor online is needed (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018).

Related to the utilitarian value of social media for counter-messages, perceived self-efficacy (i.e., an individual's perceived ability to accomplish a behavior or action; Bandura, 2001; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) in challenging sexualization through social media seemed low. First of all, participants were concerned with not being able to get their message across as intended and being interpreted in a wrong way. Second, they felt their reach was too limited for counter-messages to have any profound effect. Celebrities, on the other hand, were considered more effective actors when it came to challenging sexualization. Previously, social media has been shown to have unique positive influences on self-efficacy perceptions through observing others and receiving social support (Argyris & Xu, 2016). In fact, research among young adult activist groups has shown that online collective efficacy perceptions influence individuals' participation in online collective actions (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). However, this did not seem to apply to engagement in counter-messages in the present study, which may have to do with the lack of peers engaging in counter-messages. Members of the peer group are probably more effective role models for increasing self-efficacy compared to celebrities, given the higher levels of identification and similarity with the peer group. Related to this notion, next to uses and gratifications, the present study found an important role of social influence processes of adolescent girls' peer groups in explaining engagement with counter-messages.

### ***Social influence processes: the importance of identification and social norms***

In terms of social influence processes, *identification* (i.e., being influenced by others in the same social group) and *compliance* (to social norms) seemed to play an important role in adolescent girls' decision to (not) engage with counter-messages in social media. Since (almost) none of their direct friends were engaging with counter-messages, the participants were not motivated to do so themselves. Being the first or only person in their peer group to post a counter-message, or in general posting

something that diverted from the social norm of posting fun and positive content in social media, was holding the participants back from engaging with counter-messages. Moreover, in the rare instances when people in their social surroundings were posting counter-messages or more critical content, this was usually not rewarded, and at its worst punished with negative feedback of being an attention seeker, a “nag,” or being inauthentic.

The internet allows for the expression of different parts of their (sexual) identity, and for taking on less traditional and stereotypical norms (Burns & Eaton, 2016). However, the present study suggests that this is not necessarily the case, as offline norms and sanctions seem to prevail even in the way girls express themselves online. That said, the present study focused on social media platforms where girls are presenting themselves to an online audience that they also engage with offline. In contrast, the rewarding feeling of solidarity that can be created by certain online communities and platforms can motivate girls to post content that challenges sexist notions (Ringrose & Mendes, 2018). Online communities, and more private or anonymous online spaces, may elicit more identity exploration and less adherence to social norms, as was also suggested by the participants in the present study (i.e., the use of the messenger application WhatsApp). Relatedly, the participants in the present study showed a strong sense of public commitment; what they showed of themselves online needed to match their sense of identity and self-concept. Girls felt it was acceptable to post counter-messages only if it truly reflected their *authentic* selves, both online and offline. Such public commitment has repeatedly been considered an important explanatory factor in people’s (online) self-presentation (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Schlenker et al., 1994; Walther et al., 2011).

A final explanation for adolescent girls’ lack of engagement with counter-messages related to social influence processes, is that such behavior simply does not match the values from their social environments that they had internalized. There seemed to be little conversations at home with parents, or with their friends, about sexualized images in the media. When such discussions occurred, it was often initiated by the girls themselves or elicited by extreme examples of sexualization in mainstream media. It seems likely that internalizing a value system that criticizes sexualization and places value on such criticism is a prerequisite for engaging with counter-messages online, and that such a value system may be lacking in adolescent girls’ environment.

### ***The role of media literacy***

A final explanation for adolescent girls’ lack of motivation to engage with counter-messages online may be related to their media literacy skills, in particular understanding media effects and counter-messages. Overall, girls showed limited awareness of the full range of sexualization, and were mostly skilled in recognizing unrealistic body ideals in the media. This may be indicative of the type of media literacy that girls are currently taught, both online and offline, which may focus mostly on body image (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Burns & Eaton, 2016) rather than sexualization in the media. Moreover, young adolescent girls (aged 12–13), found it difficult to understand that media images could convey a message beyond the specific details in the picture, and

that such messages could be challenged by other people. Similarly, girls' criticism of sexualization in social media in previous research also seemed to be targeted mostly toward the person in the photo (i.e., as being "slutty") and as such seemed to reinforce rather than resist the sexual double standard (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). The present study seems to support the idea that adolescent girls show little concerns about the sexualization of women in society at large (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009).

Furthermore, a third person effect hypothesis (Davison, 1983) appeared, not uncommon in media effects (Perloff, 1999), where the participants felt that other young girls were influenced by sexualized media messages and body ideals, but not them. This is in line with previous studies where adolescents have voiced concerns about potential negative effects of sexual and stereotypical media content, although such effects seem to concern other children and adolescents, and other content than they enjoy (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009). While adolescents can be skeptical, this does not always mean that they are immune to media effects (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009). In fact, some of the answers in the present study suggested that adolescent girls are not as unaffected by media messages as they thought. In sum, the participants' lack of awareness of the influence of sexualized media messages, and the fact that they did not take such messages seriously, seems another likely explanation for why they did not engage with counter-messages online. Notably, this lack of awareness may be part of a larger societal rhetoric that is part of the neoliberal and post-feminist environment that girls grow up in, which will be discussed next.

### ***Counter-messages in social media and their linkage to post- or popular feminism***

Growing up in a neoliberal and post-feminist era, the girls in this study were raised with mainstream media and popular culture spreading notions of feminine empowerment, such as the importance of personal choice and pleasing oneself (as opposed to pleasing others/men), being a sexual subject rather than sexual object, being powerful and playful rather than passive or victimized (Gill, 2009). When it comes to their views on sexuality in the media, adolescents value honesty, happiness and personal freedom rather than following externally imposed moral codes (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009). This was also reflected by the participants repeatedly responding to sexualized images with statements such as "this is her own choice." Contemporary young women see sexism as an issue that needs to be managed individually, and view feminism as valuable but no longer necessary, and at the same time as extreme and ideological (Scharff, 2016). Although this was not discussed extensively and therefore not included in the main findings of this study, one girl in the present study mentioned that she preferred to react to sexism head on and face-to-face, which seems to support the idea of sexism being an individual issue.

Since (self-) sexualization is considered a result of personal and individual choice, rather than a structural societal and political issue that needs to be addressed collectively (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Scharff, 2016), it may not be surprising that the participants did not feel that sexualization of girls and women required a counter-movement in social media. In that sense, the participants' lack of self-efficacy in terms of online movements may also be an



illustration of young women's belief in the need for individual responsibility and action above the need for collective action (Scharff, 2016). That said, it may be that such an individualistic view mostly relates to issues for which adolescent girls do not (yet) have a strong personal identification, which relates back to the finding that intrinsic needs were not mentioned in relation to engagement with counter-messages in the present study. In instances where personal relevance and intrinsic affective needs are high, online engagement in counter-messages will likely increase (Mendes et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the importance of humor, and not being too "difficult" or a "nag," also resonates with current manifestations of "popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Feminism, and with it the criticism on sexism, has become popular especially on, and for a substantial part due to, social media. At the same time, social media is a place of struggle for feminism, since it allows for an immediate backlash by "popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018). Although not explicitly acknowledged as misogyny, the participants in the present study did seem to be aware of a backlash that would follow any expression of feminist thought or content in social media. One of the girls in this study that identified as a feminist was still cautious to be seen as a "feminazi," which is indicative of the current generation of young women's "othering of feminism" as extreme, difficult and unpleasurable and distancing themselves from the allegedly transgressive aspects of feminism (Scharff, 2016).

Moreover, the focus on light and humorous content to challenge sexual stereotypes or sexism, seems part of the flattening of meaning of content in social media, where merely liking or sharing of content is seen as appropriate (feminist) action and the need to actually change sexist and patriarchal structures is diminished or lacking altogether (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Indeed, popular feminism in the (social) media is successful precisely because of its ease (Banet-Weiser, 2018), which is supported by the hedonic value of social media content in the current findings. Finally, the important role that the participants ascribed to celebrities resonates with the crucial role of "visibility" in popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Such a focus on visibility and celebrity culture may distract young women from systemic, structural sexism, and reduce the intrinsic need for social change and challenging of sexualization (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

One limitation of the current study is the lack of diversity of the sample. To avoid intrusiveness we did not measure personal characteristics of the participants, such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status (SES). However, the school at which the study took place is situated in a neighborhood with a largely middle-class and white population. While this is a relevant sample for the research topic, given that white middle-class girls from high SES background are often the target audience of sexualization in the media as well as post-feminist ideological campaigns (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Scharff, 2016), future research needs to focus on girls from different ethnic backgrounds and SES levels in order to fully understand how adolescent girls engage with sexualization and online counter-messages. Relatedly, future research needs to also take other characteristics, such as gender identity and sexual orientation, into account.

In addition, the choice to interview groups of friends allowed for a more natural conversation on topics of engagement in social media and discussions of sexualization and sexism. Given the importance of peers in how young people engage in social media, and their development of sexual and gender identities, I wanted to capture such social influences within the conversation (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). However, one disadvantage of such practices is that certain group dynamics, such as one or two dominant group members dominating the conversation, can distort the conversation. Giving participants equal turns to talk when the situation asked for it was used as a strategy to overcome this limitation.

## Conclusion

The findings of the present study initially do not seem to promote the use of social media for effective media literacy interventions and increasing adolescent girls' critical views. We may need to teach girls about media effects beyond body image, and make them more aware of the occurrence and effects of sexualized media messages, as well as teach them the importance *and* effectiveness of a critical voice challenging such messages. When adolescent girls have internalized such a critical voice, it is crucial to create a social media environment that fosters social influence processes such as identification and compliance that promote engagement with counter-messages. This could be done by creating communities around peer role models (e.g., influencers) that create and share counter-messages. The present study is just a first step in exploring how and why adolescent girls could challenge sexualization using counter-messages in social media and can be considered part of a shift in current research and policy agendas, where the focus needs to be placed more on empowering adolescents to use media in a positive way, rather than protecting them from potentially harmful influences of media content by restricting the use of such content.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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