

# Sexiness on Social Media: The Social Costs of Using a Sexy Profile Photo

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## Abstract

Using an experimental methodology, the present study assessed college men's perceptions of a female peer who presented herself on Facebook in either a sexualized or nonsexualized manner. One hundred and seventeen college men viewed a Facebook profile with either a sexualized profile photo or a nonsexualized profile photo of a young woman and then evaluated the profile owner. They also reported on their dating attitudes. Results indicated that the sexualized profile owner was considered less physically attractive, less socially appealing, and less competent to complete tasks. Interest in dating and casual sex with the profile owner as well as general dating attitudes were largely not impacted by the type of profile photo. Findings suggest that using a sexualized profile photo on Facebook comes with some relational costs for young women. Strategies for educating young people about new media use and sexualization are discussed.

## Keywords

sexualization, objectification, media, social networking, social media

The sexualization of girls and women is highly prevalent in Western media and consumer culture (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006; Ward, 2016; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013). For example, 46% of young adult female characters on prime-time, U.S. television shows are sexually objectified (Smith, Choueiti, Prescott, & Pieper, 2012). Social media, which are user created and highly popular among young people, are also a context for sexualization (Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Ringrose, 2011). As a result, depictions of women as sex objects are commonplace in today's Western media environment, sending the message to girls and women that being sexy is valued. Yet recent evidence demonstrates that young women risk negative social evaluations by their female peers for enacting a sexy self-presentation on social media (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016a), especially if they appear to their female peers to have low self-esteem (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). Little research has investigated male attitudes toward women enacting a sexualized self-presentation on social media, despite almost whole-scale adoption of this media form by young people (see Moreno, Swanson, Royer, & Roberts, 2011 for an exception). Therefore, the present study investigated college men's attitudes toward a female peer with either a sexualized or nonsexualized profile photo on social media. In

addition, the impact of viewing these portrayals on men's dating attitudes was investigated.

## Prevalence of Sexualized and Objectifying Media

Youth today are growing up in an unprecedented media environment. On average, young people (ages 8–18) spend 7.5 hr per day engaged with media (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Given that they are typically multitasking and engaging with more than one type of media at once, the amount of content they are exposed to is close to 11 hr per day (10 hr, 45 min). Emerging adults (ages 18–15) are consuming media at even higher rates, approximately 12 hr per day (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013). A highly popular type of media in the lives of young people is social media. Approximately 89% of U.S. teens use social media with Facebook as the most popular site used by 71% of teens (Lenhart, 2015). Similar patterns are true for young adults (ages 18–29; Perrin, 2015). Accordingly, the content of media and its effects on young

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viewers should be of concern to parents, educators, and society in general.

One noticeable pattern in the content of traditional media (such as television, movies, and magazines) is the consistent portrayal of girls and women in sexually objectifying ways. This pattern has been documented across a range of media forms (see Ward, 2016 for a review). For example, in a content analysis of music videos, 71% of videos by female artists contained indicators of sexual objectification (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). Other content analyses of music videos have found similar patterns in levels of sexual objectification of women (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2012). For a complete summary of the prevalence of the objectification and sexualization of girls and women across multiple media forms aimed at a range of audiences, see Ward (2016) who summed up this portrayal of girls and women as “relentless” (p. 4).

The prevalence of sexualization in new media (such as social media and texting) has been studied to a much lesser extent compared to traditional media. I located just three content analyses of sexualization on social media. Hall and colleagues (2012) analyzed 24,000 MySpace.com profile photos belonging to U.S. women ages 18–49. Overall, rates of self-sexualization were fairly low with revealing clothing being the most common practice (15% of sample). However, data were collected in the winter, and it is not clear whether time of year impacted the findings. Self-sexualization was more common among young women compared to older women. Other group differences by race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, education level, and profile owner’s body type were also apparent. In a study of 400 profiles on a popular, English-language teen chat site, Kapidzic and Herring (2015) found that teen girls were more likely to post pictures in which they were wearing revealing dress or were partially undressed (49%) than were boys (26%). Finally, in a small-scale study of approximately 100 Facebook profiles of Dutch adolescents (ages 11–18), Doornwaard, Moreno, van den Eijnden, Vanwesenbeeck, and ter Bogt (2014) found that a minority of participants displayed sexual (24%; such as comments about sexual experiences or behaviors) and romantic (26%; such as dating or being in love) references on their social media profiles. No revealing personal images (defined as images including full or partial nudity beyond what one might see at a public beach) were found.

Together these patterns reveal that young people today regularly see girls and women portrayed in sexualized ways in both traditional and new media they consume on a daily basis. The present study investigated men’s attitudes toward a woman who enacts a sexualized self-presentation on social media as well as the impact of this sexualized presentation on their dating attitudes.

### Theoretical Frameworks

Attitudes toward women with a sexualized self-presentation on social media should be considered in conjunction with cultural attitudes toward women’s bodies. Objectification theory argues

that Western societies routinely sexually objectify the female body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Women’s bodies are regarded as objects for the pleasure and evaluation of others, specifically men and boys. Sexual objectification separates the personhood of a woman from her body and bases a woman’s worth on her appearance and sexual appeal. Objectification occurs through interpersonal encounters, such as being the object of a sexually objectifying gaze, as well as through engagement with visual media, for example, viewing the commodification of female bodies to sell consumer products. As a result of this cultural pressure, girls and women may come to regard their bodies from an outsider’s perspective, focusing on how their bodies *appear* rather than what they can *do*, termed self-objectification. The extent to which a society validates sexual objectification is related to the probability of girls and women engaging in objectifying practices, such as posting sexualized photos on social media (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). For an in-depth discussion of pressures girls and women may feel to portray themselves in sexualized ways on social media, see Daniels and Zurbriggen (2016b).

The APA’s Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) set forward a definition of sexualization which broadened the concept of sexual objectification put forth by objectification theory. Sexualization occurs under four conditions: (1) a person’s value is derived from their sexual appeal or behavior rather than from their personal qualities and characteristics, (2) a person’s physical attractiveness is judged narrowly and equated with their sexual appeal, (3) a person is made into a sexual object for the pleasure of others rather than treated as a multifaceted person, and (4) sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (e.g., in the workplace). The present study examined the first condition by investigating men’s attitudes toward a woman with a sexualized profile photo on social media. Specifically, the present study investigated whether the profile owner would be reduced to the sexualized profile photo and evaluated on that basis rather than judged by her entire personhood represented in her profile.

Priming theory (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994) is also relevant to the present study because it explains short-term effects of exposure to media. It posits that when individuals consume media, semantically related thoughts are triggered for a short window of time. Thus, when asked to report attitudes toward a sexualized profile photo of a woman on social media, the viewer is likely to draw on prior experiences in which sexualized women were evaluated. As discussed below, such evaluations are likely to be negative.

### Attitudes Toward Sexualized Women

A growing body of research has investigated how viewers cognitively process a sexualized target and their attitudes toward a sexualized target (primarily women). Much of the existing research has investigated the processing or perceptions of sexualized female targets with less research on sexualized male targets. Ward (2016) provided a comprehensive review of research on sexualization ( $n = 135$  studies; 73% used

experimental designs), the majority of which has used still visual images such as photographs (50%) with much less research on video media, video games or virtual reality, music media, or a combination of media. Three major patterns from this body of research include the following: (1) people cognitively process sexualized images of women differently than nonsexualized images such that sexualized women are perceived in less human ways; (2) sexualized women are thought to be less competent, have reduced mental states (e.g., thoughts and intentions), and possess lower morality compared to nonsexualized women; and (3) exposure to sexually objectifying media is associated with increased sexist attitudes toward women (including stronger support for the belief that women are sexual objects) and greater tolerance for violence against women.

Research on attitudes toward sexualized targets is particularly relevant to the present investigation. Existing studies have demonstrated that sexualized girls or women are considered to be less competent, less determined, less intelligent, less agentic, having less self-respect, being less fully human, less moral, and being more sexually experienced (Daniels, 2012; Daniels & Wartena, 2011; Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005; Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012; Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Johnson & Gurung, 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010; Schooler, 2015; Ward, 2016). Further, negative reactions to sexualized images of women may be especially likely in particular groups of people. In an investigation of implicit associations and neural responses, Cikara, Eberhardt, and Fiske (2011) found that men (but not women) with hostile sexist attitudes made fewer associations of agency to sexualized female targets compared to nonsexualized targets. In addition, fMRI results demonstrated men with hostile sexist attitudes showed decreased activation in regions of the brain related to mental state attribution in response to sexualized images of women. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that individuals have a wide range of negative perceptions about women or girls portrayed in sexualized ways.

Much of the existing research on attitudes toward sexually objectified women has focused on traditional media. Far less research has investigated this phenomenon on social media. It is possible that attitudes toward a social media user, who may be a friend or peer and, therefore, similar to the viewer, differ from those toward an individual depicted in traditional media, who is likely to be an actor, celebrity, or model living an extraordinary life and, therefore, dissimilar to an average person. Indeed, Daniels and Zurbriggen (2016b) found that familiarity with a social media profile owner is relevant to attitudes toward the profile owner's sexualized behavior. Evaluations of sexualized behavior (i.e., posting a swimsuit/underwear profile photo) were more lenient for friends and harsher for strangers. The authors concluded that the peer context may be particularly important to interpreting behavior on social media.

Two existing studies of sexualization on social media are particularly relevant to the present study. Using a focus group methodology, Moreno and colleagues (2011) investigated college men's attitudes toward sexual references displayed on

women's social networking profiles (including status updates, personal photographs, and downloaded quotations and images). College men reported that sexual reference displays on their female peers' social networking profiles increase their expectations for sexual activity with the profile owner but decrease their interest in pursuing a dating relationship with her. In an experimental study, Daniels and Zurbriggen (2016a) created a mock Facebook profile of a young woman and manipulated whether participants saw either a sexualized or nonsexualized profile photo. Adolescent girls and young woman rated the sexualized profile owner as less physically attractive, less socially appealing, and less competent to complete tasks compared to the nonsexualized profile owner. These studies suggest that dating attitudes and personal evaluations are impacted by women's use of a sexualized self-presentation on social media. The present study advances this prior research in two ways: (1) by investigating how sexualization impacts men's personal evaluations of the profile owner and (2) by using an experimental methodology to investigate how sexualization on social media impacts men's dating attitudes using a more comprehensive measure of dating attitudes than prior research. Prior research on traditional media indicates that consumption of sexualized media is associated with dating attitudes (pattern three described above). For example, in a short-term longitudinal study of Dutch adolescent boys (ages 12–16), Ward, Vandenbosch, and Eggermont (2015) found that boys who consume sexualizing magazines (e.g., *Playboy*) more often are more likely to objectify women and endorse gender-stereotypical beliefs about dating over time compared to their peers.

### Present Study

An experimental methodology was used in the present study, in which a mock Facebook profile had either a sexualized or nonsexualized profile photo. The content of the profile was the same in both conditions. The purpose was to investigate possible costs that young women might face from portraying themselves in a sexualized manner on a social networking site. Specifically, this study investigated college men's perceptions of a peer who self-sexualizes on Facebook and whether a sexualized profile affects men's dating attitudes.

It is clear that there is significant sociocultural pressure on girls and young adult women to portray themselves in sexualized ways in the United States. Indeed, the current beauty standard for women dictates a sexy ideal body (Murnen, 2011; Murnen & Smolak, 2013; Tiggemann, 2013). Accordingly, I expected men to report that the young woman with the sexualized profile photo is more physically attractive (Hypothesis 1) and socially appealing (Hypothesis 2) compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile photo. However, when women are depicted in a sexualized manner, their intelligence and competence are evaluated negatively by others (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016a; Ward, 2016). Thus, I expected men to report that the young woman with the sexualized profile

photo is less competent at tasks compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile (Hypothesis 3).

In addition to perceptions about the profile owner, dating attitudes were investigated including attitudes toward the profile owner specifically and dating attitudes more generally. Based on Moreno and colleagues (2011) findings, I expected that men would be more interested in a committed dating relationship with the young woman with the nonsexualized profile compared to the young woman with the sexualized profile (Hypothesis 4) but would be more interested in a casual sexual relationship with the young woman with the sexualized profile compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile (Hypothesis 5). Finally, based on prior findings (Ward et al., 2015; Ward, 2016), I expected that men who saw the sexualized profile would be more likely to endorse gender-stereotyped attitudes about dating and relationships, including the beliefs that men are sex-driven, dating is a game, and women are sexual objects, compared to men who saw the nonsexualized profile (Hypothesis 6).

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sample of 117 college men (ages 18–30,  $M = 20.80$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ) was used in the present study. The majority of participants were first-year students (36%; 26% second year, 21% third year; 13% fourth year, and 4% more than fourth year). On average, participants reported that their mothers and fathers had attended some college. Participants were primarily European American (66%) with 15% Latino, 3% African American/Black, 3% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/American Indian, 3% other ethnicity, and 10% reported multiple ethnicities. Participants were primarily heterosexual (exclusively 81%; predominantly 6%) with 4% reporting exclusively homosexual, 3% predominantly homosexual, 3% bisexual, 2% questioning/unsure, and 1% did not report sexual orientation. Participants who reported a nonheterosexual (either exclusive or predominant) sexual orientation or who did not report a sexual orientation ( $n = 15$ ) were excluded from analyses about their dating attitudes because these questions assess heterosexual interest and beliefs. Thus, 117 participants constituted the sample for Hypotheses 1 through 3, and 102 participants constituted the sample for Hypotheses 4 through 6.

Nine participants were dropped from the study (and are not included in the sample information described above). Five participants were over the age of 30 which means the profile owner is not their peer. One participant took less than 5 min to complete the online survey, suggesting that he may not have attended to the stimuli and survey questions closely. Three participants took more than an hour to complete the survey, suggesting that they were doing other things while responding to the survey rather than focusing on the survey.

Participants were recruited through the subject pool in the psychology department at a medium-sized state university in

the Western region of the United States as well as through social media posts to friends of a research assistant. Psychology students were compensated with a participation point they could assign for class credit. Non-psychology students were not compensated.

### Materials

A mock Facebook profile was created for this study. The fictional name of Amanda Johnson was assigned to the profile owner. Amanda was a blonde, blue-eyed, 20-year-old, European American woman attending a community college. All of the content in the profile was the same in the two experimental conditions including the cover photo, work and education, entertainment likes, and friends. Only the profile photograph was manipulated between experimental conditions. In the nonsexualized condition, the profile photograph depicted a young woman dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved shirt with a scarf draped around her neck covering her chest. In the sexualized condition, participants viewed the same young woman in a low-cut red dress with a slit up the leg to the mid thigh and a visible garter belt.

To enhance the ecological validity of the study, public Facebook profiles of young adult women were reviewed by a young adult female research assistant to determine the content of the profile. A similar approach for creating a mock social networking profile was used by Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, and Shulman (2009). Popular musicians (e.g., Katy Perry), books (e.g., *Twilight*), movies (e.g., *The Notebook*), and television programs (e.g., *Supernatural*) were selected. Finally, the photographs were not staged for the study, but were actual photographs of a young woman, known to a research assistant, who volunteered their use for the present study. The nonsexualized profile photo was her senior class photograph. The sexualized photo was her senior prom photograph.

### Procedure

Participants completed the experiment online. After completing the consent process, they were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions ( $n = 52$  sexualized;  $n = 65$  nonsexualized). In both conditions, participants were instructed to view Amanda's profile and answer a series of questions about her and themselves.

### Measures

**Perceptions of profile owner.** To assess perceptions about the woman depicted in the Facebook profile, participants completed the Interpersonal Attraction Scale (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). There are three subscales including physical attraction ( $\alpha = .90$ ; e.g., "I think she is quite pretty"), social attraction ( $\alpha = .68$ ; e.g., "I think she could be a friend of mine"), and task attraction ( $\alpha = .86$ ; e.g., "I have confidence in her ability to get the job done"). To improve intuitive understanding of the constructs being measured, I will refer to these

constructs as physical attractiveness, social appeal, and task competence. Each subscale contains 5 items on a 7-point, Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Subscale items were averaged into a composite score. Higher scores indicate higher perceptions of attractiveness, appeal, and competence.

**Dating interest in profile owner.** Single items assessed how interested the participant was in a committed dating relationship and a casual sexual relationship with Amanda Johnson. Each item was on a 5-point, Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 5 (*very interested*). Higher scores indicate more interest.

**Gender-stereotyped attitudes toward dating.** Participants completed the Attitudes about Dating and Relationships Scale (Ward, 2002). The scale has three subscales including men are sex-driven (7 items;  $\alpha = .70$ ; e.g., “It’s difficult for men to resist sexual urges and to remain monogamous”), dating is a game (5 items;  $\alpha = .52$ ; e.g., “Dating is basically a game, a battle of the sexes, where both males and females try to gain the upper hand and manipulate each other”), and women are sexual objects (8 items;  $\alpha = .72$ ; e.g., “Being with an attractive woman gives a man prestige”). Items were on a 6-point, Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Subscale items were averaged into a composite score. Higher scores indicate greater support for the belief.

**Facebook usage.** Participants were asked to report their Facebook usage with 3 items. They were asked about the frequency of their use with the item “how many days during a typical week do you log-on to Facebook?” and the intensity of their use with two items including “how many minutes per day do you spend on Facebook on a weekday” and “how many minutes per day do you spend on Facebook on weekend days.” All 3 items were presented in an open-ended format, so that participants typed in their responses. When participants supplied a range (e.g., 30–60 min), the average was taken.

**Relationship status and sexual history.** In a yes or no question, participants were asked if they were currently in a committed dating relationship. If they replied yes, they were asked the length of their relationship. Participants were also asked if they had ever had sexual intercourse. If they replied yes, they were asked to report the number of sexual intercourse partners they have had.

**Sexual orientation.** Participants were asked to report their sexual orientation. Response options included: exclusively heterosexual, predominantly heterosexual, bisexual, predominantly homosexual, exclusively homosexual, and questioning/unsure.

**Demographics.** Participants were asked to report their age, ethnicity, their level of education, and their parents’ level of education.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Almost half of participants reported being in a committed relationship (42.2%). Average length of the relationship was approximately 2 years ( $M = 25.60$  months,  $SD = 27.53$ , range 2–120 months). The majority of participants reported having had sex (71.1%). The modal number of sexual partners was 1 ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 9.33$ , range 1–65 partners). There were no differences between experimental conditions in likelihood of being in a committed relationship,  $t(107) = -.88$ ,  $p = .383$ , length of the relationships,  $t(43) = -.04$ ,  $p = .972$ , having ever had sex,  $t(112) = -.051$ ,  $p = .611$ , or total number of sexual partners,  $t(74) = -.074$ ,  $p = .460$ .

Participants reported logging on to Facebook most days of the week ( $M = 5.00$  days,  $SD = 2.29$ ). During the week, they averaged approximately a half hour on Facebook per day ( $M = 32.48$  min,  $SD = 45.39$ , range 0–240 min). During the weekend, they averaged more time on Facebook ( $M = 42.31$  min,  $SD = 64.60$ , range 0–360 min). Participants in the nonsexualized condition logged on to Facebook more days per week ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ) than participants in the sexualized condition ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ),  $t(112) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .008$ . There were no differences between experimental conditions in amount of time spent on Facebook during the week,  $t(112) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .126$ , or on the weekend,  $t(112) = 1.30$ ,  $p = .197$ .

To determine whether experimental and control group participants were equivalent on demographic categories,  $t$ -tests were conducted. There were no differences between experimental conditions in age,  $t(88) = -.90$ ,  $p = .369$ , level of own education,  $t(113) = 0.07$ ,  $p = .948$ , level of mother’s education,  $t(115) = -.63$ ,  $p = .529$ , or level of father’s education,  $t(115) = -1.00$ ,  $p = .318$ . To determine whether participants of color as compared to European American participants were evenly distributed across experimental groups, a  $\chi^2$  test was conducted. Participants of color were more likely to be in the nonsexualized condition ( $n = 29$ ) compared to the sexualized condition ( $n = 11$ ),  $\chi^2(12, n = 117) = 7.07$ ,  $p = .008$ .

Finally, intercorrelations between outcome variables were calculated. Social appeal was positively correlated with physical attractiveness,  $r(115) = .56$ ,  $p < .001$ , and task competence,  $r(115) = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ . Physical attractiveness was positively correlated with task competence,  $r(115) = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Hypothesis Testing

For Hypothesis 1 that the young woman with the sexualized profile photo would be considered more physically attractive compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile photo, there was a main effect of profile type,  $t(115) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .001$ . Unexpectedly, participants who viewed the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) rated the owner higher in physical attractiveness compared to the sexualized profile ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

For Hypothesis 2 that the young woman with the sexualized profile photo would be considered more socially

appealing compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile, there was a main effect of profile type,  $t(115) = 2.70, p = .008$ . Unexpectedly, participants who viewed the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 4.49, SD = 0.85$ ) rated the owner higher in social appeal compared to the sexualized profile ( $M = 4.03, SD = 0.97$ ).

For Hypothesis 3 that the young woman with the sexualized profile photo would be considered less competent at tasks compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile, there was a main effect of profile type,  $t(115) = 3.45, p = .001$ . As expected, participants who viewed the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 4.61, SD = 0.84$ ) rated the owner higher in task competence compared to the sexualized profile ( $M = 4.04, SD = 0.95$ ).

For Hypothesis 4 that participants would be more interested in a committed dating relationship with the young woman with the nonsexualized profile compared to the young woman with the sexualized profile, there was no main effect of profile type,  $t(100) = 0.86, p = .393$ . Unexpectedly, participants who viewed the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 1.53, SD = 0.85$ ) were no more interested in a committed dating relationship with the owner than participants who saw the sexualized profile ( $M = 1.39, SD = 0.81$ ).

For Hypothesis 5 that participants would be more interested in a casual sexual relationship with the young woman with the sexualized profile compared to the young woman with the nonsexualized profile, there was no main effect of profile type,  $t(100) = 0.67, p = .505$ . Unexpectedly, participants who viewed the sexualized profile ( $M = 1.57, SD = 0.96$ ) were no more interested in a casual sexual relationship with Amanda than participants who saw the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 1.70, SD = 0.95$ ).

In post hoc analyses, interest in a committed dating relationship and a casual sexual relationship were investigated among participants who reported not currently being in a committed dating relationship ( $n = 63$ ). The Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ( $p = .011$ ) for interest in a committed dating relationship. Therefore, equal variance was not assumed for the  $t$ -test. This subset of single men participants was more interested in a committed dating relationship with the young woman with the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 1.70, SD = .98$ ) compared to the young woman with the sexualized profile ( $M = 1.30, SD = 0.54$ ),  $t(50.33) = 2.01, p = .049$ . There was no difference between conditions in interest in a casual sexual relationship,  $t(61) = 1.40, p = .168$ . Participants who viewed the sexualized profile ( $M = 1.50, SD = 0.94$ ) were no more interested in a casual sexual relationship with the profile owner than participants who saw the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 1.85, SD = 1.03$ ).

For Hypothesis 6 that men who saw the sexualized profile would be more likely to endorse gender-stereotyped attitudes about dating and relationships, there were no main effects of profile type on any of the three beliefs that were assessed including men are sex-driven,  $t(100) = 0.43, p = .668$ , dating is a game,  $t(100) = 0.32, p = .750$ , and women are sexual objects,  $t(100) = 1.31, p = .194$ . Unexpectedly, men who

viewed the sexualized profile were no more likely to endorse the beliefs that men are sex-driven ( $M = 2.88, SD = 0.75$ ), dating is a game ( $M = 2.73, SD = 0.83$ ), and women are sexual objects ( $M = 2.81, SD = .83$ ) compared to men who viewed the nonsexualized profile ( $M = 2.95, SD = 0.75$  sex-driven;  $M = 2.77, SD = 0.77$  dating is a game;  $M = 3.01, SD = .72$  women are sexual objects). In post hoc analyses, I investigated if participants' involvement in a committed dating relationship was related to their dating attitudes and found no differences between men who reported being in a committed dating relationship versus men who reported not being in a committed dating relationship. Similarly, I investigated if participants' level of sexual experience was related to their dating attitudes, and found no differences between men with low, medium, and high numbers of sexual partners. In addition, there were no interactions between profile type and involvement in a committed dating relationship or number of sexual partners on gender-stereotyped dating attitudes.

## Discussion

Past research has found that the sexualization of girls and women negatively affects others' perceptions of their competence, mental states, and morality (Ward, 2016) as well as other females' evaluations of their physical attractiveness and social appeal (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016a). Results of the present study are consistent with existing findings, and extend this line of inquiry by examining men's attitudes toward sexualization on a user-generated, new media form highly popular among young people. For a young woman, using a sexualized photo in her Facebook profile was related to negative evaluations of her physical attractiveness (contrary to Hypothesis 1), social appeal (contrary to Hypothesis 2), and task competence (consistent with Hypothesis 3) by male peers. Thus, consistent with prior experimental findings on adolescent girls' and young women's attitudes toward sexualization on social media (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016a), using a sexualized Facebook profile photo clearly comes with relational costs for girls and women from both female and male peers. Further, it appears that a social media profile owner with a sexualized profile photo is indeed objectified by male viewers and reduced to her sexualized photo rather than judged by her entire personhood represented in her profile.

Unexpectedly and contrary to prior research (Moreno et al., 2011), men's interest in a dating (Hypothesis 4) or a casual sexual relationship (Hypothesis 5) with the profile owner were not affected by whether they viewed the nonsexualized or sexualized profile. However, after investigating these interests among currently single men only, level of sexualization did impact some attitudes. Single men were more interested in a committed dating relationship with the nonsexualized profile owner compared to the sexualized profile owner (partially supporting Hypothesis 4). Future research should gauge interest using a hypothetical scenario (i.e., if you were single, would you be interested in a dating relationship?). Interest in a casual sexual relationship, in contrast, was not related to the level of

sexualization in the profile for single men. Of note, dating/sexual interest in “Amanda” (sexualized or nonsexualized) was low in both the entire sample and among single men only. It could be that participants simply did not like her, or, perhaps, her profile was not exciting or intriguing enough to generate interest in a romantic or sexual relationship. For example, Amanda’s profile contained preferences for a range of media and entertainment popular among young women which may have conveyed a generic or average image which men found off-putting. Future research should collect open-ended responses to better understand men’s reactions to the profile owner.

Similar to the patterns for interest in a dating or sexual relationship with Amanda, men’s gender-stereotyped dating attitudes were not affected by the level of sexualization in the profile (contrary to Hypothesis 6). This pattern contrasts with prior research on traditional media (Ward et al., 2015; Ward, 2016) but is consistent with longitudinal research with Dutch adolescents in which dating attitudes were not affected by exposure to sexy self-presentations on social media over time (van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2015). The nature of social media compared to traditional media could explain these patterns. By its nature, social media has a temporary quality to it. Indeed, Manago (2015) characterized social media as “streams of human expression” (p. 511). It could be that exposure to a stranger’s sexualized social media profile is too fleeting to impact one’s attitudes about dating compared to watching objectifying portrayals of women in a movie or TV show, playing a video game with objectified female characters, or reading magazines with objectifying images and content. Further, effects of objectifying traditional media tend to be stronger when viewers identify with the characters in the media they consume (e.g., Ward, 2002; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Whether there is an analog to viewer involvement for social media is an interesting question for future research to explore. To address the issue of fleeting exposure to social media content, future research should investigate whether individuals, whose social networks contain high levels of objectification through photos, status updates, friends’ content, and media preferences, hold more gender-stereotyped dating attitudes compared to individuals with low levels of objectification in their networks.

The null effect of sexualization on men’s gender-stereotyped dating attitudes might also be attributable to sample characteristics. On average, men in this sample reported somewhat lower levels of gender-stereotyped dating attitudes ( $M_s = 2.73\text{--}2.90$ ) across both conditions than prior studies ( $M_s 2.79\text{--}3.39$ , Ward, 2002;  $M_s 3.20\text{--}3.47$ , Ward & Friedman, 2006;  $M_s 2.84\text{--}3.13$ , Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). The present sample was drawn from students living in a socially and religiously conservative medium-sized city. Thus, men in the sample may be more conservative and religious than other college samples, although 70% reported ever having had sex so they are sexually experienced on average. In addition, there are sizable commuter and low-income (one-third of students are Pell grant recipients) populations among the student body and Greek life is minimal, suggesting that the present sample

may differ from other college samples. Investigating a nontraditional college sample can be considered a strength of the current study, giving voice to individuals not typically included in research in the behavioral sciences (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). However, it would be useful for future research to include more traditional college students including fraternity members and Division 1 athletes, who may be exposed to more sexist attitudes toward women (Brown, Sumner, & Nocera, 2002; Gage, 2008), to see whether the present findings replicate or if differences exist.

Collectively, these findings have implications for young women. Many young women may feel pressured to enact a sexy self-presentation online because of strong messages in traditional media and consumer culture that women’s sexiness is valued. They may, therefore, post sexualized photos on social media in an attempt to gain attention from men. The present findings indicate that men are not interested in a romantic relationship with a woman who uses a sexualized profile photo. They also endorse negative attitudes toward a profile owner with a sexualized photo. Therefore, using a sexualized profile photo on social media is unlikely to be a successful strategy for women to gain positive perceptions or romantic attention from men.

The possibility that young women may misperceive men’s preferences for sexiness on social media is reminiscent of both women’s and men’s misperceptions of opposite-gender body ideals. Specifically, research with college students has found that women overestimate the level of thinness men prefer in women, and men overestimate the level of muscularity that women prefer in men (Carlson & McAndrew, 2004; Grossbard, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2011; Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004). With regard to the display of sexiness on social media, young women may overestimate young men’s preferences, suggesting an avenue for education. Indeed, young people in the United States clearly need more education about healthy sexual relationships. Unfortunately, it appears that the opposite is happening in U.S. secondary schools. Recent nationally representative data show a decline in formal sex education in U.S. high schools from 2006 to 2013 (Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, & Boonstra, 2016). In addition, the content of sex education is often determined at the local level, resulting in a great deal of variability in what students are exposed to in terms of education about sexuality. Indeed, less than half of all high schools and only 20% of middle schools in the United States cover all of the topics critical to ensuring sexual health, identified by the Centers for Disease Control, in their sex education curriculum (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SEICUS], 2016). In addition, 1.7 billion dollars in federal funding has been spent on abstinence-only sexual education since 1982 despite empirical evidence documenting its ineffectiveness, resulting in far less money for comprehensive approaches to sex education (SIECUS, 2015). Together, these patterns indicate that large numbers of young people are not typically exposed to sexual education that includes a focus on healthy sexual relationships. With the advent of social media and mobile technologies, this

education must include a focus on the role of technology in relationships. For example, young people need the opportunity to discuss the potential benefits and risks of presenting themselves in sexualized ways through social and other new media (e.g., texting) with trained sexual health educators who are not narrowly focused on promoting abstinence from sexual behaviors.

Whereas many young women who post sexualized photos of themselves on social media may be seeking attention from men, some women may be doing so for their own subjective pleasure or feelings of sexual empowerment and agency. In a recent scholarly dialogue about sexual empowerment, researchers have argued for the need to acknowledge adolescent girls' and young women's subjective experiences and perceptions in theory and research on women's sexuality (Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, 2010). At the same time, however, other scholars have argued that contemporary young women in the United States are exposed to neoliberal messages about sexual agency that constrain women's sexual expression through a guise of personal choice and sexual freedom (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Tolman, Anderson, & Belmonte, 2015). A useful line of future inquiry would be to interview young women who post sexualized content on their social media profiles about their motives for these choices (see Ringrose, 2011 for similar research on adolescent girls in the United Kingdom) and their thoughts on the social meaning of these portrayals.

### Limitations and Future Directions

As in all studies, there are limitations to the present findings. First, the Cronbach's alpha for the *sex is a game* subscale of the Attitudes about Dating and Relationships Scale was low ( $\alpha = .52$ ), calling into the question the reliability of that subscale in measuring its construct. A similar problem was true for that subscale in Ward's (2002;  $\alpha = .59$ ) original study. Future research should refine this subscale to improve its psychometric properties. Second, in hindsight, a measure of religiosity would have been useful to examine if religious beliefs were related to men's dating attitudes and if they interacted with experimental condition to impact men's beliefs. Third, the sample was primarily European-American, limiting the generalizability of these findings to non-White college men. Investigating attitudes toward sexualization among ethnic minority men is an important future direction. Another avenue for future research is investigating attitudes toward men who self-sexualize on social media. Limited research has examined men's self-sexualizing behaviors on social media (Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010). Even less has examined viewers' attitudes toward sexualized men on social media (for an exception see Hood & Daniels, 2016).

### Conclusion

In the present study, I found that using a sexualized Facebook profile clearly comes with relational costs for young women. Young women who post sexualized profile photos will likely

be judged by their male peers as being less physically attractive, less socially appealing, and less competent. In addition, men may be less interested in a dating or sexual relationship with the owner of a social media profile with sexualized profile photo. Thus, if young women are aiming to attract positive attention from men via a sexualized profile photo, that is not likely to be a successful strategy.

These findings should be situated within larger conversations about what constitutes healthy relationships among young people, including the role of new technologies, as well as the sociocultural environment that sexually objectifies women. Young women in the United States are immersed in a culture that prioritizes women's sexiness, yet are judged negatively for being sexual, leaving them in a no-win situation. Accordingly, addressing societal factors directing and constraining women's sexuality and sexual expression should be a primary goal.

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