

Shades of Sexualization: When Sexualization Becomes Sexual Objectification

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Abstract Sexualization in mass media is a widespread phenomenon. Although sexualization and sexual objectification are often used as synonymous, they are two different concepts. Across two studies, we investigated how sexualization affects perceptions of women (Study 1) and men (Study 2) as sexual objects. Participants were asked to judge sexual objectification, competence, and sexiness of female and male models portrayed with different degrees of sexualization, namely, as Non-Revealing (dressed), merely Revealing (undressed), and Sexualized Revealing (undressed and provocative). The results of both studies showed that as the level of sexualization increased so did participants' perceptions of the targets as sexual objects. However, the level of sexualization affected perceived competence and sexiness differently depending on the target's gender. Male models' competence decreased as the level of sexualization increased, whereas female models portrayed as merely Revealing and as Sexualized Revealing were judged as equally incompetent. Male targets' sexiness was not affected by the level of portrayals' sexualization, whereas Sexualized Revealing portrayals enhanced the perceived sexiness of female targets. Finally, in Study 2, the results showed

that male targets in Sexualized Revealing portrayals were judged as less masculine. Our findings suggest that sexualization contributes similarly to the perception of both women and men as sexual objects but affects other variables depending on the target's gender. Our work extends previous literature and informs us about the consequences that sexualization of men and women have on others' judgments.

Keywords Sexualization · Objectification · Competence · Gender differences · Masculinity · Mass media

Mass media often portray men and women in a sexualized way or as sexual objects (Ward 2016). The sexualization of men and women is often used to catch customers' attention by enhancing beauty and activating sexual associations (Gill 2008; Lazar 2006). In fact, sexualization is a phenomenon that implies attention on the person's appearance and thus can assume different shades: It can be merely beauty-based, namely, focusing on physical beauty, or sexually-based, namely, focusing on the person's sexual features and expected desires by implying his/her sexual readiness (Morris and Goldenberg 2015). Sexual objectification, instead, is defined as a representation of a person as a mere body/object for others' sexual desires (Fredrickson et al. 1998). Although sexual objectification and sexualization have been often used as synonymous and examined as if they were the same phenomenon, they refer to different concepts (Ward 2016). The present work aims to investigate whether female and male portrayals that differ in their degree of sexualization elicit different perceptions of the target as a sexual object, further exploring the impact of sexualization on perceptions that usually go hand-in-hand with such a phenomenon.

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Sexual Objectification and Sexualization

In a recent review about the effects of media sexualization, Ward (2016) highlighted the fact that sexual objectification and sexualization are two distinct, albeit related, phenomena. *Sexual objectification* means reducing a person to a body and treating her/him as an object (see Bernard et al. 2012; Gervais et al. 2012a, 2012b). Indeed, as illustrated by Nussbaum (1999), objectification implies being perceived and treated as a tool for others' use (instrumentality), being considered interchangeable with others (fungibility), being inert (inertness), being violable (violability), being denied autonomy and experience (denial of autonomy and of subjectivity, respectively), and being perceived as an object owned by someone (ownership). Hence, through sexual objectification, a denial of mind and personality occurs as the person becomes a passive and interchangeable instrument for others' satisfaction (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Langton 2009; Nussbaum 1999).

Sexualization, instead, is a much broader phenomenon than sexual objectification per se. It can be defined as a focus on the sexual appeal of a person whose value is solely based on her/his sexiness (see American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls; American Psychological Association 2007). Importantly, different degrees of sexualization can be observed depending on the attention and emphasis reserved to specific body parts and the extent to which the target is portrayed as provocative and sexually ready. Indirect evidence supporting this idea comes from popular social network quizzes. For instance, Ringrose (2011, p. 105) describes a quiz titled "Are you Sexy, Flirty, or a Slut?," which asks young women to answer, among other questions, how short their usual skirts are and whether they like to strip or perform lap dance. Depending on their answers on clothing and behaviors, respondents are classified as reaching a specific level of sexual readiness (i.e., sexy, flirty, or a slut). In addition, the score appears on the screen along with a picture of a woman in underwear and her sensual poses varying according to the result (Ringrose 2011). This example simply suggests that sexualization could be quantified, and although sexualization does not necessarily imply objectification, if particularly enhanced, it may lead to perceiving a person as a sexual object (Langton 2009; in this regard, see also Holland and Haslam 2013).

In the literature, the terms sexualization and sexual objectification have been mostly used interchangeably, and the relationship between the two phenomena has been rarely investigated. As a matter of fact, in a recent review on sexual objectification, Loughnan and Pacilli (2014) highlighted the need for studies examining which portrayal triggers more sexual objectification. To address this issue, we examine in our current work how different degrees of sexualization in models' portrayals affect the perception of the targets as

sexual objects. More specifically, we investigated whether the mere exposure of scantily dressed individuals was enough to elicit sexual objectification and whether this perception increased when sexualizing characteristics (e.g., sensual pose, provocative facial expression) of the portrayal were involved.

Sexualization of Men and Women in Mass Media

Over the past few decades, women's sexualization has been observed in different types of media (e.g., TV, ads, magazines, and social networks; see Ward 2016, for a review). Although sexualization is still more frequent for women than for men (Ganahl et al. 2003; Messineo 2008), sexualized portrayals of men are present in mass media as well (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Coupland 2007; Farquhar and Wasyliw 2007; Gill et al. 2005; Hatton and Trautner 2011; Pope et al. 2001). The way through which sexualization occurs may go hand-in-hand with people's beliefs about what makes an individual sexy in the eyes of observers. In a study conducted by Smolak et al. (2014), women believed that to appear sexy, they have to put on make-up and wear revealing clothes, tight pants, short skirts, and high heels. When men were asked to indicate what makes themselves look sexy, they reported being clean and well-dressed, along with being fit and muscled (Smolak et al. 2014). These beliefs are reflected in women's, and to some extent men's, sexualized mass media portrayals (see, for instance, Smith and Sanderson 2015). Indeed, sexualized women are portrayed with provocative and revealing clothes, whereas men are presented shirtless and showing off their muscles (Barlett et al. 2008; Ricciardelli et al. 2010). In addition, sexualization can be emphasized by models' body postures and by models playing with their bodies and clothes (e.g., self-touching, pulling down their underwear) in order to convey sexually-related fantasies (see Hatton and Trautner 2011). All these additional sexualizing characteristics may contribute to the perception of targets as sexual objects.

A study done by Hatton and Trautner (2011) showed that different degrees of sexualization can be found in magazines. By considering *Rolling Stone's* magazine covers published from 1967 to 2009, these authors systematically coded portrayals of both men and women over the four decades. In particular, they coded the amount of nudity; whether the portrayal involved the targets' face; whether the target was conveying a sexualizing pose, mouth or touch; whether the pictures emphasized or drew observers' attention to chest, buttocks, and pelvic areas; and whether the target was simulating sexual acts or sexual role playing. Hence, Hatton and Trautner's study examined how different elements of such portrayals could be used to measure different degrees of sexualization, demonstrating that each sexualizing parameter contributes to an increase/decrease of sexualization. (For other studies testing one or a few sexualizing parameters at the time,

see Johnson et al. 2007; Krassas et al. 2001; Lambiase and Reichert 2006; Nitz et al. 2007; Reichert and Carpenter 2004; Soley and Kurzbard 1986).

By testing and scoring each parameter, Hatton and Trautner (2011, p. 262) found that although over the years both men and women were more frequently sexualized, the intensity of such sexualization differed between genders wherein women's—but not men's—portrayals changed and reached a level that the authors defined as “hypersexualization.” Specifically, they considered the magazine covers that obtained the highest scores for the sexualizing parameters as hypersexualized. For instance, women portrayed fully naked, with a strong emphasis on breast and pelvic areas, and in extremely provocative and explicitly sexual poses obtained very high scores on each parameter and therefore were classified as hypersexualized, whereas women portrayed as simply revealing their body (e.g., naked) but in more neutral poses (e.g., standing), not touching, mouth closed, and not emphasizing their sexual readiness were categorized as “sexualized” (p. 266).

Testing Sexualization and Its Consequences

Research has shown that sexualization is related to many negative outcomes. So far, a majority of studies have focused on women and have shown that being portrayed in a sexualized fashion leads observers to perceive women as less competent and intelligent (Daniels and Wartena 2011; Graff et al. 2012; Gurung and Chrouser 2007), less agentic (Cikara et al. 2011), less moral (Holland and Haslam 2013; Loughnan et al. 2010), less human (Heflick and Goldenberg 2009; Morris and Goldenberg 2015; Vaes et al. 2011) and as lacking mind (Gray et al. 2011; Holland and Haslam 2013; Loughnan et al. 2010). Recently, it has been found that when a woman is portrayed in a sexualized manner (vs. wearing jeans and a t-shirt) on social networks, she is perceived as less socially attractive and less competent (Daniels and Zurbriggen 2016a). Those studies examining both genders have shown that, similar to women, sexualized men are perceived as less agentic, less competent, less moral, and lacking mind (Gray et al. 2011; Loughnan et al. 2010; Nezlek et al. 2015). However, compared to men, women seem to be at a higher risk of being perceived as lacking competence when sexualized (Nezlek et al. 2015).

As noted by Loughnan and Pacilli (2014), previous studies have operationalized sexualization by using a variety of different stimuli. In some studies, sexualized targets were models portrayed in bikini, underwear, or with revealing clothing—namely, targets merely showing off their body and skin (Goldenberg et al. 2011; Gurung and Chrouser 2007; Johnson and Gurung 2011; Johnson et al. 2007; Landau et al. 2006; Loughnan et al. 2010; Loughnan et al. 2015).

Other studies used pictures of targets wearing provocative clothes and/or adopting sensual poses (Bernard et al. 2012; Holland and Haslam 2013) as well as pictures portraying half naked and sexually provocative targets or capturing only body parts (Vaes et al. 2011). Moreover, in many scientific articles, only a general description of the stimuli used is offered to the readers, leaving the targets' level of sexualization unclear.

Although these studies showed consistent patterns of results on several dimensions (e.g., dehumanization, mind attribution, perception of competence, agency, experience, morality), they did not directly assess or compare targets varying in degrees of sexualization. Therefore, it is blurred whether an increase in sexualization corresponds to an increase of negative appraisal of the target, or whether, for instance, being portrayed with revealing clothes but in a non-sexualized fashion (i.e., undressed but in a neutral, non-suggestive pose and attitude) is a sufficient condition to be judged as negatively as are sexualized targets (i.e., undressed, provocative, and sensual).

To the best of our knowledge, only Gray et al. (2011) tried to address this issue. Across four studies, these authors examined observers' first impression of different types of portrayals, such as targets (a) showing only their face versus showing their face and undressed body (in underwear), (b) shown clothed versus shirtless, and (c) shown clothed versus fully naked (with genitals and breast pixelated). Note that in the last two cases, the targets' pose was kept constant across types of portrayal, and only the amount of nudity varied. Overall, these authors found that Revealing portrayals increased the perception of targets as able to experience fear, desire, and pain but decreased attributions of agency such as capacity of self-control, moral actions, and planning.

Importantly for our purposes, in Study 4 by Gray et al. (2011), the authors also directly compared three types of portrayals of the same woman—namely, a Non-Revealing (fully clothed), a Revealing (naked), and a Sexualized Revealing portrayal. As shown in their material (p. 1214, Fig. 5), the revealing but not sexualized woman had the same pose as in the Non-Revealing portrayal, whereas the Sexualized Revealing portrayal varied in terms of some sexualizing parameters (e.g., sensual pose, mouth). The results indicated that the same woman was perceived as having more experience and less agency when she was presented in a sexualized way than in the other two types of portrayal. Interestingly, their findings further suggested that the revealing but non-sexualized woman was associated with an intermediate level of both experience and agency. Correlation analyses of the perceived level of woman's attractiveness and picture's sexual suggestiveness with attributions of experience and agency indicated that higher levels of suggestiveness were associated with higher experience and lower agency attributed to the targets. Additionally, a higher level of attractiveness was related to lower agency but not to higher experience. Despite the

positives of their study, the impact of different types of portrayals was tested on a single female target, leaving unanswered whether these effects can be generalized to other women and whether male targets would be affected in a similar way.

The Present Research

Across two studies, we aimed to contribute to the previous literature by examining whether different degrees of sexualization lead to different perceptions by both women and men of targets' sexual objectification. We also tested whether similar sexualization-driven perceptions would emerge for both female (Study 1) and male (Study 2) targets. Previous studies (see Loughnan and Pacilli 2014, for a review) considered evidence of dehumanization and mind attribution as indirect evidence of perceiving the targets as objects. The rationale is that because those qualities are uniquely human, denying them to sexualized targets implies conceiving them as non-human, namely, as objects or mere bodies. In the current research, we directly asked participants to judge to what extent the targets were presented as sexual objects. (For a similar way of testing sexual objectification of stimuli, see Loughnan et al. 2010; Vaes et al. 2011).

Moreover, we investigated two aspects that are related to sexualization and sexual objectification—namely, competence and sexiness. People who are sexualized very often are perceived as lacking competence. Indeed, the focus on their appearance leads to the perception that the target is more sexy and attractive and to ignorance of the target's other characteristics. Similarly, when a person is sexually objectified, s/he is perceived as an inanimate body that can be appraised for its physical features but not for the qualities (e.g., competence) of the person it belongs to (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Fredrickson et al. 1998; Gurung and Chrouser 2007; Nezelek et al. 2015). Hence, sexualized targets are usually perceived as sexy but incompetent.

In our studies, we used pictures of the same female and male models portrayed as Non-Revealing (i.e., clothed and non-sensual), merely Revealing (i.e., in swimwear/underwear and non-sensual), and Sexualized Revealing (i.e., in swimwear/underwear and with sensual posing). To these stimuli, we applied Hatton and Trautner's (2011) coding scheme to assess their degree of sexualization. Then, participants in Study 1 (targets: female models) and Study 2 (targets: male models) were asked to rate such targets on perceived sexual objectification, sexiness, and competence.

We predicted that as the level of targets' sexualization increased, perceptions of such targets as sexual objects would also increase. Thus, the models depicted in Sexualized Revealing portrayals would be more likely to be perceived as sexual objects than in the Revealing and Non-Revealing

portrayals (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we predicted that an increase in sexualization would be related to a decrease in perceived competence (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we expected that Sexualized Revealing targets would be perceived as sexier than the same targets in merely Revealing and Non-Revealing portrayals would be, and no differences on sexiness were expected between the last two conditions (Hypothesis 3; for differences across distinct types of stimuli, see Loughnan et al. 2010; Vaes et al. 2011).

Study 1

Method

Participants

Fully 110 participants completed an online survey. Two of these participants did not identify themselves as Italian. To have participants with the same cultural background and avoid any possible misinterpretation of concepts due to language issues, they were excluded from the analyses. The final sample comprised 108 Italian participants (73 women, 34 men, 1 unknown; $M_{\text{age}} = 24.59$, $SD = 4.52$, range = 18–58). Approximately half the respondents ($n = 59$, 54.6%) were from Northern Italy, and the rest were mostly from the South ($n = 42$, 38.9%), with a minority from the Center of Italy ($n = 5$, 4.6%; $n = 1$, .9% missing). Participants were mostly students ($n = 74$, 68.5%; $n = 1$, .9% missing), Catholics ($n = 53$, 49.1%), and identified as either politically left/left-center ($n = 42$, 38.8%) or right/right-center ($n = 31$, 28.7%; $n = 7$, 6.5% missing).

Materials

To create our set of stimuli, we first looked for models on the web (Google images) and searched for pictures depicting them in various outfits and poses. In the end, we selected six White female models (ages ranging from 25 to 35) who were not Italian, were not commonly recognized as famous models, and were portrayed in ways that allowed us to test our hypotheses. In particular, for each of these six models, we selected three color pictures: (a) one portraying the woman wearing casual clothes (e.g., a non-revealing dress or t-shirt and jeans), in a frontal neutral pose, and with a neutral facial expression (Non-Revealing portrayal); (b) a second showing that same woman in swimwear/underwear, in a frontal neutral pose, and with a neutral facial expression (Revealing portrayal); and (c) a third portraying that woman in underwear, in a provocative pose, and with a provocative facial expression (e.g., sensually playing with hair, lips slightly parted, arching the back to emphasize the curve) (Sexualized Revealing portrayal). (Stimuli are available upon request to the authors).

The 18 pictures were categorized using a modified version of the Hatton and Trautner's (2011) coding scheme (see also Daniels and Zurbriggen 2016b). Two independent judges, a man and a woman, coded the amount of nudity—from 0 (*dressed*) to 5 (*full nudity*); touch—from 0 (*no touching*) to 3 (*sensual touching*); pose—from 0 (*neutral pose*) to 2 (*sexual pose*); mouth—from 0 (*closed or smiling mouth*) to 2 (*sensual mouth*); and breast/chest, genitals, and buttocks—from 0 (*not visible*) to 2 (*very emphasized*) for each parameter. Categories such as text, sexual acts, and sexual role play included in Hatton and Trautner's original coding scheme were not measured because they were not present in our stimuli. We also excluded the category head/body because all the pictures portrayed the target from the head to the legs.

Judges' agreement was assessed by calculating the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) on each sexualizing parameter. According to the guidelines developed by Cicchetti and Sparrow (1981; see also Cicchetti 1994), ICC were all acceptable (range from .54 to .95), except for the buttocks parameter. Because one of the judges assigned the same score to all of the pictures, such an absence of variability made it impossible to calculate ICC. Therefore, such a parameter was excluded by the overall rating (from 0 to 16) that was calculated by summing the scores obtained by each photo on each parameter for the two judges separately. Overall ratings from the two judges (ICC = .95) were then averaged to obtain a sexualization index (SI) for each picture. Following Hatton and Trautner (2011), we proceed to check the range of SI obtained by the three types of portrayals that were the following: Non-Revealing ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .86$, range = 1.5–4.0), Revealing ($M = 7.33$, $SD = .93$, range = 6.0–8.5), and Sexualized Revealing ($M = 10.92$, $SD = 1.16$, range = 9.5–12.5), which indicated that the three types of portrayal displayed different levels of sexualization according to the parameters considered here, $F(2, 15) = 111.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .94$.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were contacted by email or through social networks, and they were invited to take part in an online survey presented as a study aiming to explore how people form first impressions. They were provided with a link to the survey created using Qualtrics survey software. After being informed about the study and consenting to take part in it, participants were presented with six pictures. Following Loughnan et al.'s (2010) procedure, we created three sets of six pictures (each including two pictures per type of portrayal) and adopted a Latin-square design, so although all the participants rated all three types of portrayal, no participant observed the same model twice. This design allowed us to control for differences in our stimuli, other than those related to clothing and sexualization. This design more confidently attributes any

differences in the mean evaluations of the targets across the three types of portrayals to their degree of sexualization, ruling out alternative explanations related to the peculiar characteristics of the targets portrayed.

For each picture, participants were asked to rate the female target's sexual objectification (one item: "To what extent do you think the woman depicted in the picture is portrayed as a sexual object?"), competence (two items: "To what extent do you think the woman depicted in the picture is intelligent/competent"), and sexiness (two items: "To what extent do you think the woman depicted in the picture is sexy/attractive?"). These five items were presented in a randomized order, and participants provided their answers on 7-point scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*). Internal reliability for the scales of competence and sexiness was calculated for each picture (i.e., 18). Cronbach's alphas were all sufficient (sexiness: $\alpha_s = .66-.96$; competence: $\alpha_s = .62-.91$). An index of perceived sexiness and another of perceived competence were computed by averaging the ratings of the two pertinent items such that higher scores indicated greater perceived sexiness and competence, respectively.

Because sexist attitudes have been found to be related to how individuals process and perceive sexualized women (Cikara et al. 2011; Fox and Bailenson 2009), we measured sexism using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI, $\alpha = .90$; Glick and Fiske 1996) in its Italian version (Manganelli Rattazzi et al. 2008). Respondents were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with 22 items on scales from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Responses across items were averaged such that higher scores indicated stronger endorsement of ambivalent sexism. Finally, participants reported their gender, age, geographical background, religion, and political orientation. On the last section of the survey, participants were thanked and provided with a written explanation of the study's aims and researchers' contacts.

Results

A 3 (Type of portrayal: Non-Revealing vs. merely Revealing vs. Sexualized Revealing) $\times$ 2 (Participants' Gender: men vs. women) repeated-measures ANOVA was separately conducted on sexual objectification, sexiness, and competence. The first factor was within-participants, whereas the second was between-participants. A Bonferroni's correction was applied to all pairwise comparisons. Means and standard deviations for each dependent variable across portrayals are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that an increase in the level of targets' sexualization would lead to an increased perception of such targets as sexual objects. The ANOVA performed on sexual objectification showed that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 17.41$, $p < .001$, as indicated by the Mauchly's test. Therefore, degrees of freedom were

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of study variables by type of portrayal, study 1

Measures	Type of portrayal of female targets		
	Non-revealing <i>M (SD)</i>	Revealing <i>M (SD)</i>	Sexualized revealing <i>M (SD)</i>
Sexual objectification	2.86 _a (1.43)	4.27 _b (1.59)	5.71 _c (1.53)
Competence	4.35 _a (1.04)	3.98 _b (1.14)	3.87 _b (1.18)
Sexiness	5.05 _a (1.18)	4.80 _a (1.28)	5.64 _b (1.38)

Within each row, means that do not share the same subscript differ significantly ($p < .001$, pairwise comparisons, Bonferroni corrected)

corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ($\epsilon = .87$). A significant Type of Portrayal main effect, $F(1.73, 181.95) = 140.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$, was found. Pairwise comparisons indicated that women portrayed in Sexualized Revealing ways were more likely to be perceived as sexual objects, followed by the Revealing and then by the Non-Revealing portrayals, fully supporting our first prediction. Participants' gender did not yield any significant result: main effect, $F(1, 105) = .02$, $p = .89$, $\eta^2 = .0002$; Participants' Gender x Type of Portrayal interaction, $F(1.73, 181.95) = 1.59$, $p = .21$, $\eta^2 = .02$. To control for potential effects of ambivalent sexism, the same analysis was run including ASI as a covariate, which was not a significant predictor, $F(1, 103) = 1.36$, $p = .25$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

The analysis conducted to test Hypothesis 2, which suggested that an increase in sexualization would lead to a decrease in perceived competence, showing a significant Type of Portrayal main effect, $F(2, 208) = 10.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Pairwise comparisons highlighted how women portrayed as Non-Revealing were perceived as more competent than were women portrayed as Revealing or as Sexualized Revealing. However, no difference between these last two conditions was found. Hence, our prediction was only partially supported. Again, no significant participants' gender main effect, $F(1, 104) = .02$, $p = .89$, $\eta^2 = .0002$, nor Participants' Gender x Type of Portrayal interaction, $F(2, 208) = 1.62$, $p = .20$, $\eta^2 = .02$, emerged. Including ASI as a covariate in the analysis again yielded a nonsignificant result, $F(1, 102) = 1.79$, $p = .18$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 suggested that only Sexualized Revealing portrayals would lead to higher perceptions of sexiness compared to the other two types of portrayal. The analysis conducted on sexiness showed a significant Type of Portrayal main effect, $F(2, 210) = 26.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$. As illustrated in Table 1, pairwise comparisons indicated that Sexualized Revealing women were judged as sexier than when they were portrayed as both Non-Revealing and merely Revealing. As expected, no significant difference emerged between the last two conditions, thus fully supporting our third prediction. Participants' gender again did not influence evaluations of our dependent variable: main

effect, $F(1, 105) = .07$, $p = .80$, $\eta^2 = .001$; Participants' Gender x Type of Portrayal interaction, $F(2, 210) = .01$, $p = .99$, $\eta^2 = .0001$. Finally, the analysis including ASI as a covariate showed that ambivalent sexism was not a significant predictor, $F(1, 103) = .18$, $p = .66$, $\eta^2 = .002$.

Discussion

Our results showed that an increase in the level of sexualization led to an increase in the perception of the female targets as sexual objects. Importantly, this finding emerged when we directly asked participants to state to what extent each target was sexually objectified instead of measuring objectification through indirect measures. Our findings also suggest that observing an undressed woman (either Revealing or Sexualized Revealing) was sufficient to perceive her as a sexual object, indicating that nudity itself activated a certain degree of objectification. Notably, such a perception was exacerbated when sexualizing characteristics (e.g., emphasis on breast and pelvic areas, sensual pose, provocative facial expression) were present in the portrayal, that is, when targets were hypersexualized according to Hatton and Trautner's (2011) definition.

Interestingly, nudity per se did not affect judgments of sexiness. People often believe that wearing revealing clothes and showing their bodies is a way for women to appear sexy (Daniels and Zurbriggen 2016b; Smolak et al. 2014). Our data suggest that this is not necessarily the case because Non-Revealing and Revealing targets were perceived as equally sexy. Hence, the mere exposure of the body by portraying a woman in a bikini or underwear does not lead observers to perceive her as sexier than when she is fully clothed. It is rather hypersexualization, namely, a portrayal indicating sexual readiness, that increases sexiness. In contrast, competence decreased with any type of Revealing portrayals, indicating that being merely undressed is sufficient for observers to perceive women as lacking competence.

All in all, our study contributes to the current literature by showing that the way a woman is portrayed in a picture affects how she is perceived—specifically, as a sexual object. In particular, enhanced sexual objectification seems not to be just a

matter of nudity, but rather a combination of sexualizing elements that makes a woman being perceived as an object. Nevertheless, women who simply show off their bodies are still the target of negative impressions because revealing their body comes with perceptions of being less capable and intelligent.

Study 2

As noted, the literature examining sexualization in mass media has provided evidence that men are sexualized too (Farquhar and Wasylkiw 2007; Hatton and Trautner 2011; Pope et al. 2001). As Gill (2009, p. 143) noted, men are very often portrayed shirtless, and their bodies are presented as something “to be looked at and desired” (also see Patterson and Elliott 2002). Men’s sexualization may be signaled through a focus on body parts (e.g., arms and chest) with an emphasis placed on muscular and undressed bodies (Pope et al. 2001) and, in some cases, through sensual posing and an emphasis on the pelvic area and genitals (i.e., the definition of “erotic male” by Rohlinger 2002, p. 62). In fact, an increase of men’s portrayals in suggestive poses has been observed over the years (Mager and Helgeson 2011). Interestingly, referring to Goffman (1979), Rohlinger (2002) suggested that some sexualizing parameters, such as touching, are different in men’s and women’s advertisements. The author specifically noted that self-touching of women is usually related to emphasizing their ornamental and passive roles, whereas men’s self-touching may be perceived as more active and have various meanings (e.g., instrumental, deference, or sexual availability).

In addition to men’s and women’s differences and similarities in the way they are sexualized, very few studies have examined how sexualized men are perceived. Research findings so far have shown that sexualized men are perceived as less agentic, less competent, less moral, and lacking mind (Loughnan et al. 2010). However, arguably other consequences may be relevant for men’s sexualization in mass media. One of them is masculinity (Rohlinger 2002). In many Western societies in order to fulfill societal norms, heterosexual men need to occupy the top of the gender hierarchy—the so-called hegemonic position (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kimmel 1987). Hence, appearing masculine and dominant is important for them.

A way to emphasize masculinity and dominance is by portraying men as fit and muscular to convey a representation of physical strength. On the one hand, sexualization may function as a proxy of masculinity because it shows off men’s muscles and body (see Boni 2002). On the other hand, men’s sexualization may sometimes involve assuming sensual poses and touching that are usually seen in women (e.g., Hatton and Trautner 2011; Manago 2013). In fact, men, like women, can

be portrayed while playing with their body and/or underwear and teasing with their eyes and facial expressions (see Bordo 1999). Example of this type of men’s sexualization can be found in male advertising, where models are self-touching and are in suggestive poses with a focus on their bodies and pelvic areas.

For instance, see the model Marlon Texeira featured for Armani Exchange, who was portrayed as either shirtless with an inviting smile or exiting the pool with wet clothes and a suggestive facial expression (Armani Exchange Summer Campaign 2013). This kind of portrayal may convey a representation of men that negatively affects how they are perceived, particularly in terms of masculinity. In this regard, Mort (1996) argued that men’s sexualization and a focus on their body can be seen as a fragmentation of male power. By being portrayed as muscular and fit but also as sexually available for others’ desire, men may lose their powerful and dominant position in the hierarchy and their traditional hegemonic masculinity may be threatened.

Therefore, we examine in Study 2 whether different degrees of sexualization in male portrayals affect women’s and men’s perceptions of targets’ sexual objectification, sexiness, and competence in the same way as it occurs for female portrayals, and we advanced the same hypotheses (Hypotheses 1–3). Additionally, our second study investigated whether male’s sexualization affects perceived masculinity. More specifically, we hypothesized that an increase of sexualization would lead to a decreased perception of the male targets’ masculinity (Hypothesis 4).

To overcome a limitation of Study 1, we controlled for participants’ sexual orientation and included in the analyses only those who identified themselves as heterosexual. Sexual orientation could indeed influence judgments of the target, particularly because heterosexual and gay men may perceive male models differently (see Jackson et al. 2001; Ricciardelli et al. 2010).

Method

Participants

Fully 115 participants completed an online survey. However, as in Study 1, we excluded from the analyses those who did not identify as Italian ($n = 4$) and, for the reasons noted previously, those who did not identify as heterosexual ($n = 15$). The final sample then comprised 97 participants (62 women and 35 men; $M_{age} = 29.06$, $SD = 12.82$, range = 18–68). A majority of the sample was from the Northern Italy ($n = 68$, 70.1%; $n = 2$, 2.1% missing); most students identified as politically left or left-center ($n = 63$, 65%; $n = 6$, 6.2% missing) and as either atheist/agnostic ($n = 44$, 45.5%) or Catholic ($n = 38$, 39.2%; $n = 1$, 1% missing).

Materials

Pictures of six White male models were selected from the web following the same procedure used in Study 1. (Stimuli are available upon request to the authors.) Models were all fit and muscular, ranging between 25 and 36 years-old. Each model was portrayed in three versions (i.e., Non-Revealing vs. Revealing vs. Sexualized Revealing), and pictures were categorized using the Hatton and Trautner's (2011) coding scheme by two independent judges, a man and a woman, and following the same procedure of Study 1. Intraclass correlation coefficients showed that the judges' agreement on each sexualizing parameter was excellent (ICCs ranging from .83 to 1.00), as well as on the overall ratings (ICC = .99) calculated by summing the scores obtained by each photo on each parameter (from 0 to 18) for the two judges separately. As in Study 1, we averaged the overall ratings of the two judges to form a reliable sexualization index for each picture. SI for each type of portrayal scored as follows: Non-revealing portrayals ($M = .83$, $SD = .75$, range = 0–2); Revealing portrayals ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.72$, range = 4–8); and Sexualized Revealing portrayals ($M = 9.33$, $SD = 1.03$, range = 8–11), $F(2, 15) = 71.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .90$.

Procedure and Measures

We followed the same procedure as in Study 1 and measured perceptions of sexual objectification, sexiness, and competence of the male targets portrayed in the pictures. As previously done, we calculated internal reliability for each picture and averaged the two items of competence ($\alpha = .72$ –.96) and the two of sexiness ($\alpha = .84$ –.95) to create two reliable indexes. In Study 2, however, we also measured the perception of targets' masculinity. Answers were provided on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all masculine*) to 7 (*completely masculine*). Moreover, instead of the ASI, participants completed the Ambivalence toward Men Inventory (AMI; $\alpha = .84$; Glick and Fiske 1999; Manganelli Rattazzi et al. 2008), expressing their agreement/disagreement with 20 items on scales from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Responses were averaged across items so that higher scores captured stronger endorsement of ambivalent attitudes toward men. Next, we asked participants to indicate their attitude toward gay men (i.e., "Please, indicate your opinion toward gay men considering that 0 corresponds to a *very negative* opinion and 100 to a *very positive* opinion"). Finally, participants reported their gender, age, geographical background, religion, political orientation, and sexual orientation. Participants were then debriefed by presenting them with an explanation of the study and thanked.

Results

As in Study 1, we conducted a 3 (Type of Portrayal) $\times$ 2 (Participants' Gender) repeated-measures ANOVA on each dependent variable, with Type of Portrayal as the within-participants factor. Again, a Bonferroni's correction was applied to all the pairwise comparisons. Means and standard deviations for each dependent variable across portrayals are reported in Table 2.

Examining Hypothesis 1 (i.e., an increase in sexualization would lead to an increased perception of the male targets as sexual objects), Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 7.97$, $p = .02$; therefore, degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ($\epsilon = .92$). The results showed a main effect of Type of Portrayal, $F(1.85, 173.73) = 175.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .65$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that the male models in Sexualized Revealing portrayals received the highest score on perceptions of sexual objectification, followed by the male models in Revealing portrayals and then by those in Non-Revealing ones, supporting our prediction. Also in the case of male models, participants' gender did not impact evaluations: main effect, $F(1, 94) = .07$, $p = .79$, $\eta^2 = .001$; Participants' Gender $\times$ Type of Portrayal interaction, $F(1.85, 173.73) = .22$, $p = .79$, $\eta^2 = .002$. To control for potential effects of ambivalent attitudes toward men (AMI) and attitudes toward gay men on our dependent variable, we performed the same analysis including either the former, $F(1, 93) = .35$, $p = .55$, $\eta^2 = .004$, or the latter, $F(1, 90) = 1.78$, $p = .19$, $\eta^2 = .02$, as a covariate. Neither was as a significant predictor.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that targets portrayed in Sexualized Revealing ways would be perceived as less competent compared to those in the other two conditions. Again, the assumption of sphericity was violated, $\chi^2(2) = 27.76$, $p < .001$, and degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ($\epsilon = .80$). The results highlighted a Types of Portrayal main effect, $F(1.59, 149.44) = 37.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .28$. Pairwise comparisons showed that participants did in fact rate the male models in Sexualized Revealing portrayals as the least competent. Interestingly, Revealing portrayals were associated with a higher degree of competence than Sexualized Revealing ones, although targets in Non-Revealing portrayals were evaluated as the most competent. No significant main effect of Participants' Gender, $F(1, 94) = .13$, $p = .72$, $\eta^2 = .001$, or interaction with Type of Portrayal, $F(1.59, 149.44) = .74$, $p = .45$, $\eta^2 = .008$, was found. When AMI was included as a covariate in the analysis, it was as a significant predictor, $F(1, 93) = 6.11$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and the prior effect of portrayal on competence became nonsignificant, $F(1.57, 146.20) = 2.52$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .03$, albeit the estimated means depicted the same pattern of results. When the covariate included was attitudes

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of study variables by type of portrayal, study 2

Measures	Type of portrayal of male targets		
	Non-revealing <i>M (SD)</i>	Revealing <i>M (SD)</i>	Sexualized revealing <i>M (SD)</i>
Sexual objectification	2.94 _a (1.31)	4.85 _b (1.38)	6.00 _c (1.29)
Competence	4.17 _a (.95)	3.58 _b (1.09)	3.33 _c (1.16)
Sexiness	4.04 _a (1.26)	3.75 _a (1.47)	3.84 _a (1.70)
Masculinity	4.88 _a (1.13)	4.65 _a (1.44)	4.12 _b (1.51)

Within each row, means that do not share the same subscript differ significantly ($p \leq .004$, pairwise comparisons, Bonferroni corrected)

toward gay men, this covariate was not significant, $F(1, 80) = 2.75$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .03$.

Conversely to what was predicted by Hypothesis 3 (namely, higher sexiness associated with higher sexualization), the results indicated that the type of portrayal did not affect participants' perception of models' sexiness, $F(1.74, 165.68) = 2.60$, $p = .085$, $\eta^2 = .03$. (Degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser correction, $\varepsilon = .87$, because the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 14.92$, $p = .001$.) Again, participants' gender was not significant, both as a main effect, $F(1, 95) = 1.92$, $p = .17$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and in interaction with Type of Portrayal, $F(1.75, 165.68) = .13$, $p = .86$, $\eta^2 = .001$. Similarly, AMI, $F(1, 94) = 2.19$, $p = .14$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and attitudes toward gay men, $F(1, 90) = .11$, $p = .74$, $\eta^2 = .001$, were nonsignificant when included in separate analyses as a covariate.

Finally, support was found for Hypothesis 4, which suggested that higher sexualization would lead to a lower perception of masculinity. The main effect of Type of Portrayals, $F(2, 184) = 18.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$, indicated that perceived masculinity was lower when the male targets were portrayed in a Sexualized Revealing fashion than in the other two conditions, which did not significantly differ (see Table 2). Participants' gender did not influence evaluations of masculinity: main effect, $F(1, 92) = .002$, $p = .96$, $\eta^2 = .00003$, and interaction with Type of Portrayal, $F(2, 184) = .95$, $p = .39$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Neither AMI, $F(1, 91) = .67$, $p = .42$, $\eta^2 = .007$, nor attitudes toward gay men, $F(1, 88) = .16$, $p = .69$, $\eta^2 = .002$, were significant predictors when included in separate analyses as a covariate.

Discussion

Study 2 with male targets generally replicated the results of Study 1 with female targets. Again, we found that different degrees of sexualization elicited different perceptions of targets as sexual objects. Showing off their body was enough to induce a perception of sexual objectification, although such a perception was significantly higher when the target was revealing his body in a sexualized fashion. Conversely to what

was found for female models, evaluations of male models' sexiness did not vary depending on the type of portrayal. This result is not surprising because those characteristics believed to make a man sexy (e.g., being fit and clean) did not vary across portrayals. However, an increase of sexualization corresponded to a decrease in the competence attributed by participants to male targets. Although this effect failed to reach conventional levels of statistical significance when ambivalent attitudes toward men were taken into account, the same pattern of results emerged. Finally, judgments of masculinity were also affected by the types of portrayal. Revealing bodies per se did not affect ratings of masculinity. Nevertheless, being portrayed as revealing and sexualized decreased perception of targets' masculinity.

General Discussion

The present two studies provide evidence that being portrayed in a sexualized fashion goes hand-in-hand with being perceived as a sexual object but also that perceptions of sexual objectification vary depending on the level of sexualization. Being portrayed as Revealing, namely, undressed, was sufficient to elicit sexual objectification that was nonetheless amplified when the target was portrayed in Sexualized Revealing ways. Notably, this pattern occurred for both male and female targets.

Our findings also showed that Sexualized Revealing portrayals led observers to perceive female and male targets as less competent. However, whereas women were associated with the same (low) level of competence in the two revealing conditions, merely revealing male targets were still perceived as more competent than those portrayed as scantily dressed and sexualized. Interestingly, the type of portrayal did influence the perception of women's, but not of men's, sexiness. In fact, female targets portrayed in a sexualized way were perceived as sexier than when portrayed as undressed or fully clothed, whereas men were perceived as equally sexy regardless of the type of portrayal. Finally, masculinity was affected by the way male targets were portrayed—namely, Sexualized

Revealing portrayals led observers to perceive the models depicted in such pictures as less masculine compared to those portrayed as fully clothed and merely Revealing.

The main goal of our work was to clarify the link between sexualization and sexual objectification. By using images typically observed in mass media, we showed that different types of sexualized stimuli elicit different degrees of perceived sexual objectification. If revealing the body is sufficient to bring up the perception of the target as a sexual object, the supplement of sexualized elements (assuming a sensual and provocative pose and facial expression, self-touching, emphasizing sexual-related body parts) exacerbates the perception of models as objects for sexual purposes. It is thus clear that sexualization and sexual objectification are two different, although related, constructs. Remarkably, similar results were found for both male and female targets, suggesting that the two genders can both be perceived as sexual objects. Therefore, our work captured under which circumstances a target is perceived as an object for sexual purposes, and it indicates that the same means (e.g., revealing the body; posing sensually; playing with the body, clothes, and mouth; winking) are interpreted as signs of a sexually objectifying representation when applied to both men and women.

In contrast, sexualization had a different impact on male and on female targets' perceived competence and sexiness. This difference suggests that showing women's bodies directly triggers perceptions of them as less competent, whereas revealing men's bodies is not sufficient to drastically decrease their perceived competence. This finding is consistent with the idea that, compared to men, women are at a higher risk of being perceived as lacking competence when sexualized (Nezlek et al. 2015).

About sexiness, only Sexualized Revealing portrayals of women were associated with high perceived sexiness. In other words, female targets' sexiness was not driven by the mere exposure of the body but rather on how provocative and sexually ready they were portrayed. In contrast, male targets' sexiness did not differ across portrayals. If we look at appearance-related features, men's sexiness may be related to muscularity (Smolak et al. 2014); however, our targets were all muscular and fit models. Hence, it was not possible in Study 2 for sexiness to vary according to this parameter. Thus, other elements may be related to men's sexiness. Indeed, for men, sexiness may not be merely a matter of body appearance but rather of power and dominance, aspects usually related to gender roles (see Smolak et al. 2014). Henry Kissinger, paraphrasing Napoleon, quipped: "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac" (New York Times 1973, p. 337). As a matter of fact, what makes men attractive may be not only how good-looking, strong, and fit they appear but also how powerful and conforming to gender roles they are.

Finally, Study 2 extended the literature by investigating how sexualization affects others' perceptions of masculinity.

Although this seems a relevant characteristic to consider when studying men's sexual objectification, to our knowledge, it has never been investigated. Masculinity is often associated with muscularity, and it is assumed that a muscular man is also perceived as masculine (McCreary et al. 2005; Wienke 1998). By testing targets that were all fit and muscled (in fact, the models depicted in the three types of portrayals were the same), we could specifically assess how the way men were portrayed affected perceived masculinity. In our data, being undressed and showing off muscles per se (i.e., Revealing portrayals) did not decrease or increase perceptions of masculinity; on the contrary, revealing the body in a sexualized fashion decreased the male targets' perceived masculinity. This may be explained by the fact that posing and self-touching to convey sexual interests are behaviors not usually associated with a masculine man nor with the idea of men's dominance (Mort 1996; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Men's sexualization occurring through the same means of women's may convey an idea of men as submissive and instrumental objects that mismatches traditional gender roles and hegemonic masculinity. In a heteronormative culture, men are usually conceived as masculine and dominant, and men who deviate from such a norm are at risk of stigmatization (Connell 1995). Therefore, the type of sexualization tested in our study may have detrimental effects for men's masculinity because it depicts men as powerless objects for others' use (i.e., objectification).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our studies present some limitations. First, our design did not allow us to directly compare sexualization and sexual objectification of men and women simultaneously because separate studies were conducted. For this reason, the differences between male and female models observed in our work can only be discussed in a comparative way. However, it is worth noting that in both studies the same methodology was applied, samples were recruited from the same population, and data were collected within the same year. Nevertheless, a study including both male and female targets, as well as a between-participants design, would increase the internal validity of the study and better capture differences and similarities in perceptions of male and female targets.

Additionally, we did not find any differences in the ratings provided by male and female participants. For instance, differently from some previous studies (e.g., Nezlek et al. 2015) but in line with others (e.g., Loughnan et al. 2010), male and female observers agreed on their perceptions of targets' competence and sexiness in our studies. Although this may be interpreted as a sign that different gender observers perceive male and female targets similarly, we should be cautious in coming to this conclusion due to the limited number of men in our samples.

Another variable that may need further attention in future research is sexual orientation. It would be interesting to compare perceptions of sexualized male and female targets as a function of the observers' sexual orientation because there are differences on experiences of self-objectification and sexualized media exposure among sexual minority groups (see Engeln-Maddox et al. 2011). In addition, our research was conducted in Italy, a country where mass media has been portraying women in a sexualized fashion for years (Valtorta et al. 2016); hence, replications in other countries are needed. In fact, what being sexually objectified means can vary across cultures. For instance, individuals from cultures where women are rarely portrayed in a highly sexualized manner may perceive merely undressed women as an exemplar of a highly objectified person (see Loughnan et al. 2015). At the same time, cultures that endorse hegemonic masculinity-related norms may have a particularly negative perception of sexualized men.

Furthermore, to better understand which characteristics lead to sexual objectification, it would be important to test whether the presence of sexualizing parameters (e.g., provocative posing, touching, and facial expression) in Non-Revealing portrayals (i.e., men and women fully clothed) would affect perceptions of them as sexual objects, along with competence and sexiness. Finally, future studies should explore the interplay between masculinity and sexual objectification and their relationship with power and dominance, and it would also be interesting to test whether femininity of women is associated with sexualization.

Practice Implications

Our findings have implications for future studies on sexual objectification. Because a variety of different stimuli has been used in this field of research, mixed results in the literature may be due to the stimuli and to the way the concepts were operationalized, making comparisons across studies difficult. Here, we show that differences can be found between highly and mildly sexualized targets. Although perceptions of targets portrayed as sexual objects go along with an increase in sexualization, this was not always the case for sexiness and competence. Thus, researchers should be aware of the differences generated by different types of portrayals when designing their studies and selecting their experimental materials.

More generally, being aware that a certain type of portrayal affects observers' perceptions may be relevant for everyone. With the advent of social networks, people continuously post their own pictures and are exposed to others' judgments. Studies have shown that women posting pictures in underwear or trying to look sexy on social networks are often misjudged and their behavior disapproved (Daniels and Zurbriggen 2016b). In addition, that exposure and involvement in social networks is related to body consciousness and shame

(Manago et al. 2015). Hence, these costs seem to suggest that a culture of de- or counter-sexualization is needed to decrease self-consciousness and negative judgments. For instance, being aware that a picture I want to post may convey a certain type of representation of myself, deconstructing the shared belief that body exposure implies incompetence may be useful. Therapists may also want to consider differences that revealing and sexualized pictures posted by their clients may have on their self-esteem and self-perception, helping them understanding the consequences that these portrayals may have for their personal life (e.g., others' impressions, dating; see Szymanski et al. 2010).

In addition, our results may be informative for advertising campaigns. Indeed, consumers' emotional reactions toward different types of sexualized men and women in magazines and other mass media may vary depending on who is the observer and his/her personal beliefs and impressions. For instance, heterosexual men may react negatively to sexualized portrayals of male models as representing a lack of masculinity, with the consequence of affecting their advertising evaluations and buying behaviors.

Conclusion

The present research shows that sexualization and sexual objectification are related concepts but also that the extent to which we perceive a target as a sexual object varies according to his/her level of sexualization. This was true when both female and male targets were considered, indicating that being perceived as a sexual object is not confined to women. In addition, higher sexualization was associated with judgements of low competence, demonstrating once again that sexualization is related to dismissing a target's capacities. Importantly, men's sexualization also implies a lower perception of masculinity. Sexualization of men may be considered as a mismatch with expectations related to traditional masculinity and gender roles.

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Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. After reading the study information and their rights (anonymity, confidentiality, opportunity to withdraw, etc.) participants had to click “I agree to participate in the study” in order to proceed. Data of participants who did not complete the study in all its part were excluded from the analyses as they may wanted to withdraw their participation.

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