



Alcohol Intoxication And Lab-Based Sexual Aggression: Does Sexual Objectification Facilitate The Link?

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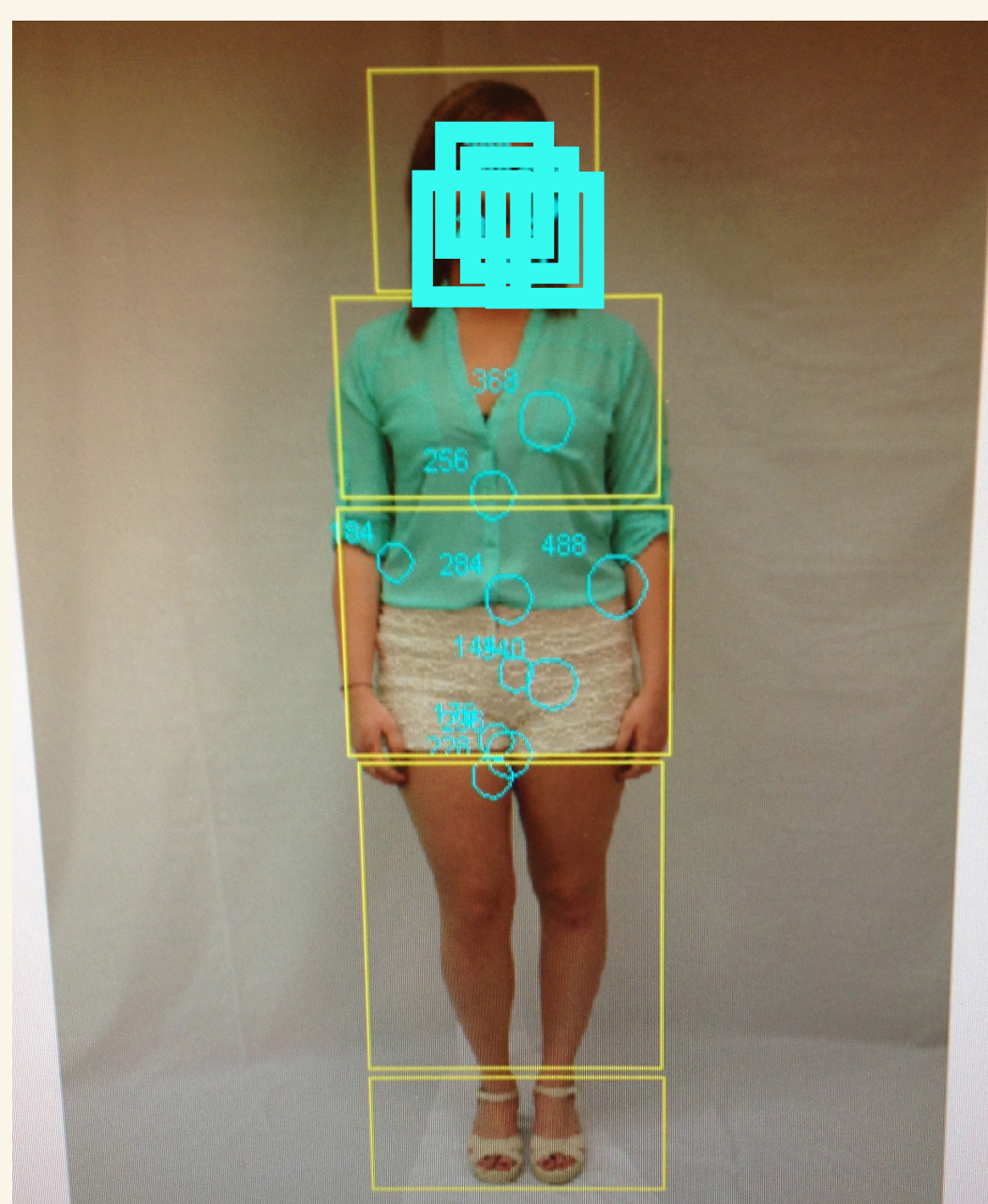
Introduction

- Alcohol has long been implicated as a contributor to sexual aggression; half of perpetrators admitting to consuming alcohol prior to their assaults (Abbey, 2011; Testa, 2002). This linkage between drinking and sexual assault is undoubtedly complex, involving a number of potential intervening factors.
- One construct that may explain the alcohol-sexual aggression link is alcohol myopia, which arises when drinking results in a narrowed attentional focus to the most immediate and salient cues in the environment (Steele & Josephs, 1990). Myopia may manifest in sexual objectification when disproportionate attention is placed on women's body parts and sexual functions (over internal characteristics).
- Correlational research indicates that myopia is associated with increased risk for sexual aggression if intoxicated men adopt a sexually objectifying perspective of women (Gervais, DiLillo, & McChargue, 2014). However, this work has relied solely on self-reported use of alcohol and engagement in objectifying behaviors, which may be susceptible to bias.
- Eye tracking technology has been used to measure objectifying gaze, or the extent to which men focus less on women's faces and more on their sexual body parts (Gervais, Holland, & Dodd, 2013). This work has shown that participants can be cued to engage in greater or less sexual objectification when told to evaluate women based on appearance or personality, respectively. However, it remains unknown whether alcohol intoxication influences the objectifying gaze and subsequent sexual aggression.
- The present study builds on prior work by examining these relations experimentally, using alcohol administration and *in vivo* measures of sexual objectification and aggression. We posited that:
 - Hypothesis 1.** Alcohol intoxication will predict increased sexual objectification, operationalized as less time spent on the face and more time on sexual body parts in two tasks – one cuing focus on personality and another cuing focus on appearance.
 - Hypothesis 2.** Increased sexual objectification, will predict laboratory sexual aggression.
 - Hypothesis 3.** There will be an indirect effect of alcohol intoxication on sexual aggression through increased sexual objectification.

Method

Participants

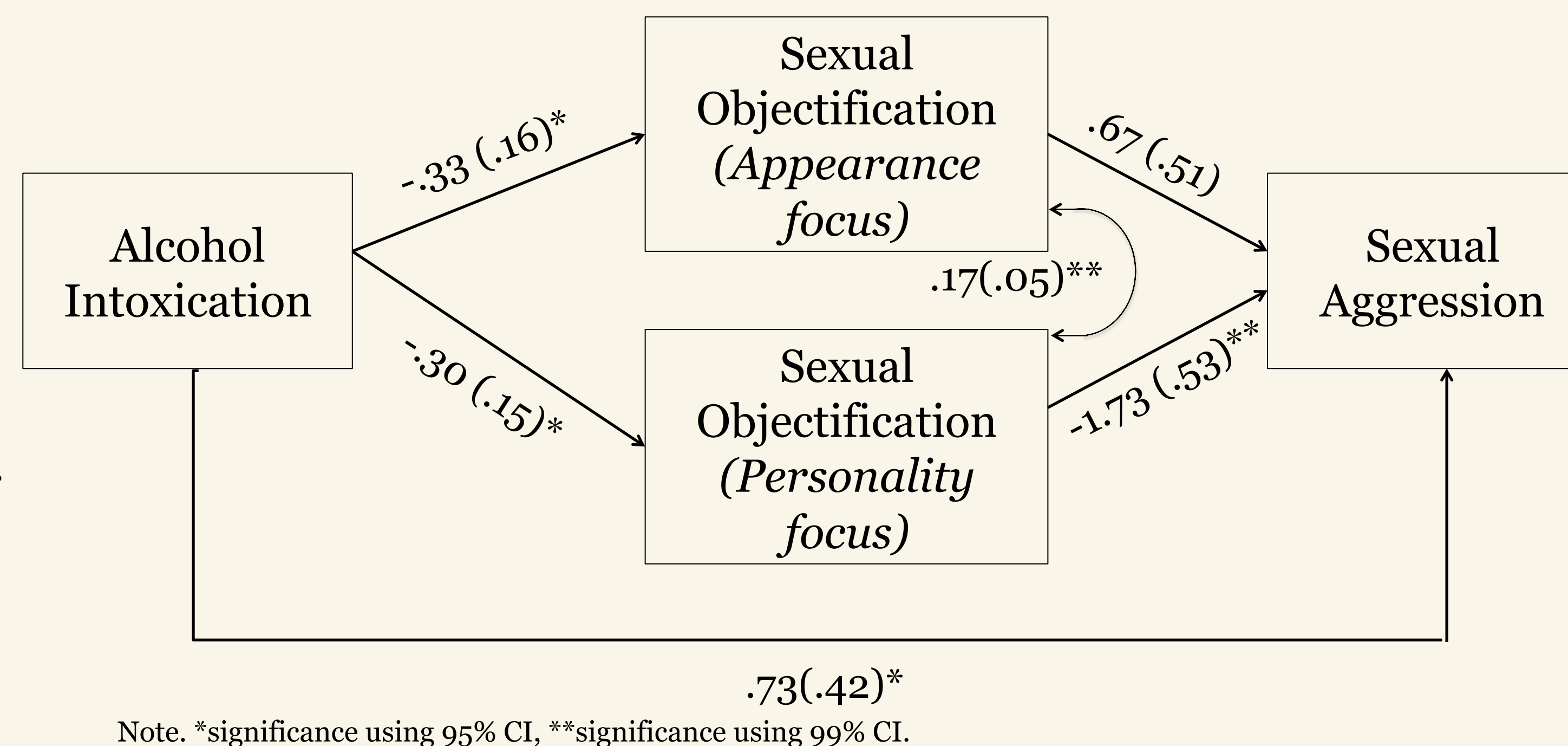
- Participants were 49 adult men recruited from a large Midwestern university ($M_{age} = 22.04$, $SD = 1.46$, Range = 21-27).
- The participants identified as White/European American (77.1%), African American (8.3%), Hispanic (8.3%), Asian American/Pacific Islander (4.2%), and Native American (2.1%).
- 11 participants reported a history of sexual coercion/assault perpetration as assessed by the Sexual Experiences Survey—Perpetrator version (Koss & Gidycz, 1985).
- All men met eligibility criteria based on NIAAA (2005) guidelines for alcohol administration studies.



Measures

- Alcohol administration** was conducted using random assignment to an alcohol or placebo condition. Men who consumed alcohol were administered 1.06 g/kg of 95% alcohol U.S. Pharmacopoeia (USP) mixed at a 1:5 ratio.
- Sexual objectification** was measured using two counter-balanced eye-tracking tasks, which involved viewing photographs of women, dressed in bar/party clothing, while being cued to focus on appearance or personality. Less time spent focusing on faces (in favor of other body parts) was interpreted as greater sexual objectification.
- Sexual aggression** was measured using a modified version of Parrott et al.'s (2012) laboratory task. Participants believed they were interacting with a female confederate via computer and were given the opportunity to send her a sexually explicit or non-explicit film clip after learning that she was uncomfortable with sexual content. Selection of the sexually explicit clip was coded as sexual aggression.

Figure 1. Direct Effects and Standard Errors in Proposed Mediation Model



Note. *significance using 95% CI, **significance using 99% CI.

Figure 2. Sexual Objectification by Alcohol Condition

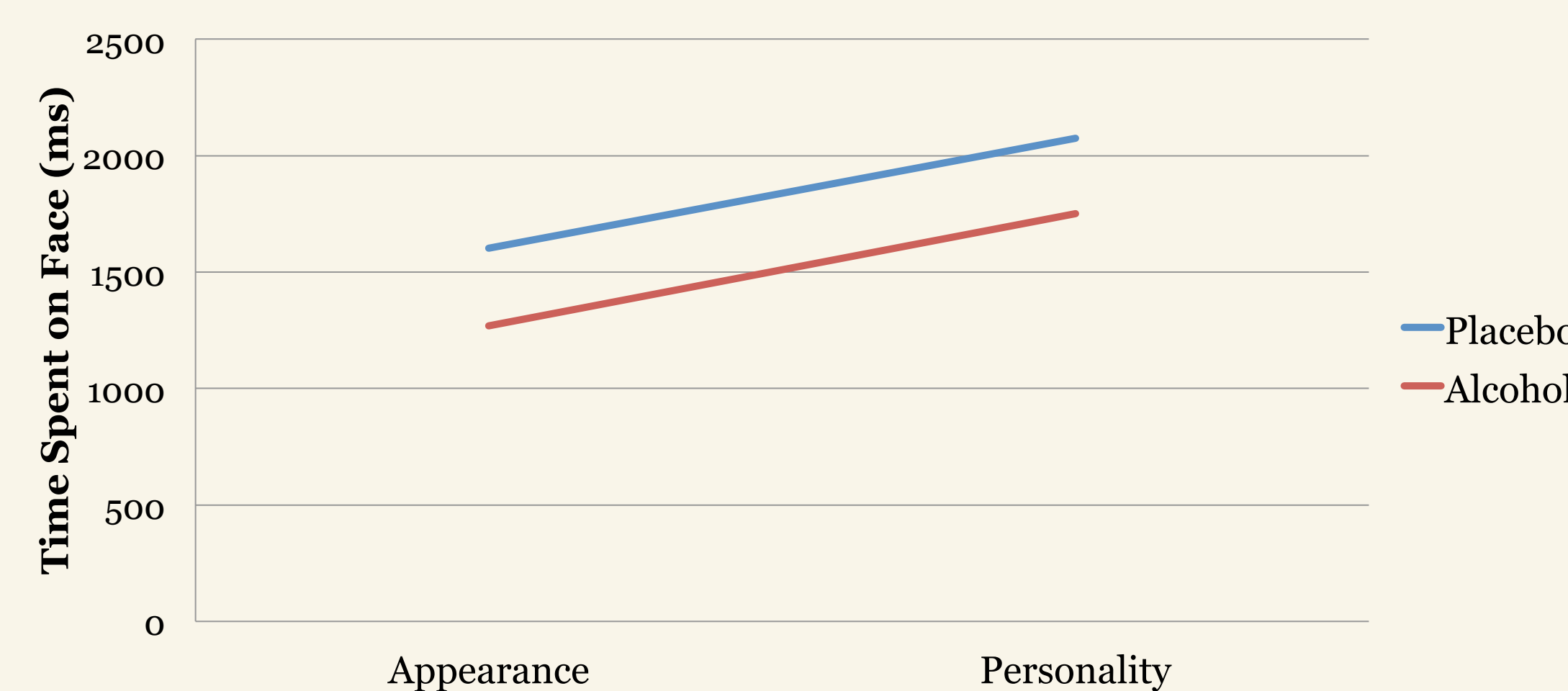
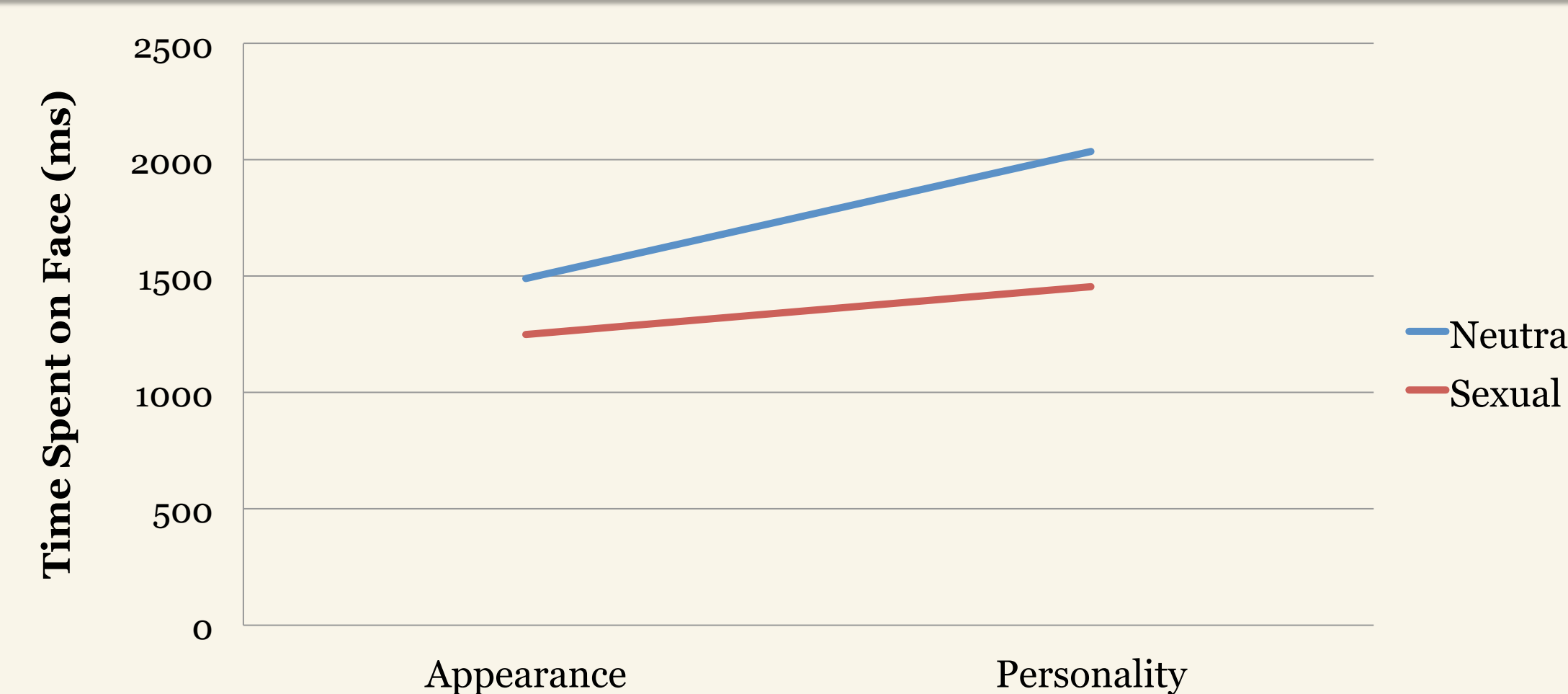


Figure 3. Sexual Objectification by Video Selection



Results

- A path model was estimated using WLSMV. A non-parametric resampling method (bias-corrected bootstrap) with 5,000 resamples was performed to derive the 95% confidence intervals.
- Seven participants engaged in laboratory sexual aggression by sending the female confederate a sexually explicit film clip.
- See Figure 1 for the estimates and standard errors of the hypothesized direct effects for the proposed path model.
 - Hypothesis 1.** Results indicated that alcohol increased had a direct effect on increased sexual objectification regardless of whether participants were cued to focus on appearance (95% CI: -.66, -.03) or personality (95% CI: -.61., -.04). Figure 2 depicts marginal means of sexual objectification (less time spent on face) by alcohol condition.
 - Hypothesis 2.** Objectification during the personality task related to greater likelihood of exhibiting sexual aggression (99% CI: -.318, -.34), but objectification during the appearance task did not (95% CI: -.41, 1.54). Figure 3 depicts marginal means of sexual objectification (less time spent on face) by video selection (sexual video selection indicates laboratory sexual aggression).
 - Hypothesis 3.** An indirect effect of alcohol intoxication on sexual aggression through sexual objectification during the personality task emerged (95% CI: .02, 1.36). The indirect effect through objectification during the appearance task was not significant. A direct effect of acute alcohol intoxication on sexual aggression remained after accounting for indirect effects (95% CI: .10, 1.79).

Discussion

- Results partially confirmed our hypotheses. Overall, alcohol intoxication increased men's objectification of women. There was an indirect effect of alcohol on sexual aggression through increased sexual objectification, but only during the task cuing participants to focus on personality.
- These findings lend support to alcohol myopia theory, such that men under the influence of alcohol may be less focused on the humanizing, and presumably less salient aspects of women (i.e., the face).
- Findings suggest that risk for sexual aggression was heightened only among men who sexually objectified women despite instructions to focus on women's internal characteristics (e.g., personality). It is possible that, because sexual objectification was higher overall when participants were cued to focus on appearance, it is only when they are asked to broaden their attention to focus on personality that problematic objectification is identifiable.
- Outside of the lab, the expectation to focus on internal characteristics is often present (e.g., workplace, friendships, unreciprocated sexual advances). Results suggest that men who are more likely to objectify women in these scenarios may be at higher risk of perpetrating sexual violence.
- The hypothesized model was not supported when considering sexual objectification based on time spent focusing on women's bodies. It is possible that the small sample size precluded statistical significance for focus on the body.
- The generalizability of the present study is limited due to small sample size, and use of a convenience sample of predominantly white college students. Nevertheless, the present findings highlight a potentially important mechanism—sexual objectification—that may help account for increased rates of sexual aggression among intoxicated men. Because sexual objectification manifests in observable actions (e.g., gazing, unwanted advances) that can be targeted through intervention, future research may lead to improved strategies for preventing sexual assault by reducing these behaviors.