



Does Looking Lead to Touching?

Sexual Objectification as a Predictor of Sexual Assault Perpetration

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Introduction

Sexual objectification occurs when someone is evaluated solely in terms of her (or his) body parts or sexual functions (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Body evaluation (e.g., ogling) represents a mild form of sexual objectification, whereas unwanted sexual advances (e.g., pinching body parts) are considered more severe forms of objectification (Kozee et al., 2007). Though sexual objectification, particularly of women, is recognized as a common occurrence (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), recent findings show that men who engage in more severe acts of sexual objectification are more likely to have perpetrated some form of sexual assault against women (Gervais, DiLillo, & McChargue, 2013; Rudman & Meschner, 2012). Little is known, however, about the specific nature of this relationship. It is possible, for example, that more extreme sexual objectification—which is accompanied by a narrowed focus on others' sexual attributes rather than their other characteristics (thoughts, feelings, desires)—is associated with more severe sexual perpetration.

In the present study we tested this possibility by examining both forms of sexual objectification (body evaluation and unwanted sexual advances) as predictors of two types of sexual assault perpetration: verbal sexual coercion and sexual aggression involving physical force. Here, we propose that more severe forms of sexual objectification (i.e., unwanted advances) may signify a more complete reduction of someone to his or her sexual attributes. This extreme reduction of another to "object status" may set the stage for more severe forms of sexual violence. Thus, we expected that while both forms of sexual objectification would predict an increased likelihood of perpetrating sexual coercion or sexual aggression, engaging in more extreme objectification in the form of unwanted sexual advances would predict being sexually aggressive as compared to sexually coercive. Finally, though the vast majority of research on sexual assault focuses on men as perpetrators, women do occasionally perpetrate sexual offenses (Giguere & Bumby, 2007). Therefore, we included men and women in the present study, examining separate models for each.

Method

Participants

Participants were 432 college students (40.5% male) who received research credit in a psychology course for taking part in the study. Participants were between the ages of 17 and 46 ($M = 19.17$, $SD = 2.08$). The majority of participants identified as European American (88.4%), followed by African American (5.1%), Hispanic (2.3%), Native American (2.3%), or another group (1.6%).

Measures

The Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS; Kozee et al., 2007) is a 15-item measure of sexual objectification that consists of two subscales. The Body Evaluation subscale contains 11 behaviorally specific items that capture acts of objectification (e.g., leered at someone's body, whistled at someone walking down a street). The Unwanted Explicit Sexual Advances subscale consists of four items that assess more severe forms of sexual objectification (e.g., sexual harassment, grabbing or pinching). However, for the purposes of this study, an item about "touching or fondling" was removed from the subscale to avoid capturing experiences that may better align with sexual assault perpetration. Participants indicate how often they engaged in each behavior in the past year with response options ranging from 1 (*rarely*) to 5 (*frequently*). Coefficient alphas for the Body Evaluation and Unwanted Explicit Sexual Advances scales in the current study were .881 and .828, respectively.

The Sexual Experiences Survey—Perpetrator Version (SES; Koss & Gidycz, 1985) is a 13-item measure that assesses sexual victimization. The SES-P assesses perpetration of unwanted sexual experiences since the age of 14 by asking participants about behaviorally defined acts ranging from verbal pressure to physical force. Response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*often*). The scale yields information about perpetration via sexual coercion (e.g., threats or lies, verbal pressure) and sexual aggression (e.g., physical force, alcohol-facilitated). For the purposes of this study, participants were categorized according to the most severe form of sexual perpetration endorsed on the SES-P.

Table 1. Summary of Logistic Regression for Sexual Objectification Predicting Sexual Coercion vs. Consensual-Only for Men

Predictor	B	SE	Sig.	e^b
Body	1.81	.43	<.001	6.12
Evaluation				
Unwanted	-.98	.56	.08	.38
Sexual Advances				
Constant	-4.57	-	-	-

Table 2. Summary of Logistic Regression for Sexual Objectification Predicting Sexual Coercion vs. Consensual-Only for Women

Predictor	B	SE	Sig.	e^b
Body	1.33	.52	.01	3.78
Evaluation				
Unwanted	.26	1.03	.80	1.29
Sexual Advances				
Constant	-4.63	-	-	-

Table 3. Summary of Logistic Regression for Sexual Objectification Predicting Sexual Aggression vs. Consensual-Only for Men

Predictor	B	SE	Sig.	e^b
Body	.91	.46	<.05	2.48
Evaluation				
Unwanted	.88	.66	.19	2.40
Sexual Advances				
Constant	-5.19	-	-	-

Table 4. Summary of Logistic Regression for Sexual Objectification Predicting Sexual Aggression vs. Consensual-Only for Women

Predictor	B	SE	Sig.	e^b
Body	3.01	.81	<.001	20.19
Evaluation				
Unwanted	-.69	1.34	.61	.50
Sexual Advances				
Constant	-7.96	-	-	-

Table 5. Summary of Logistic Regression for Sexual Objectification Predicting Sexual Aggression vs. Coercion for Men

Predictor	B	SE	Sig.	e^b
Body	-.76	.69	.28	.47
Evaluation				
Unwanted	2.07	.94	<.05	7.89
Sexual Advances				
Constant	-1.33	-	-	-

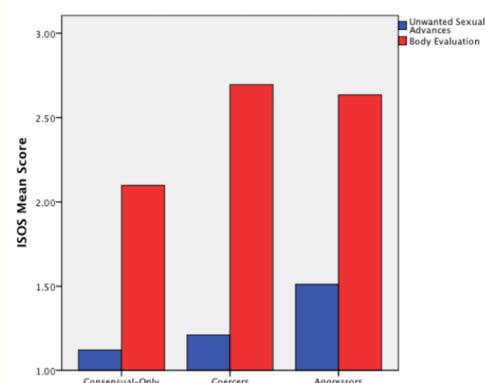


Figure 1. Men's reported perpetration of sexual objectification by sexual assault perpetration group.

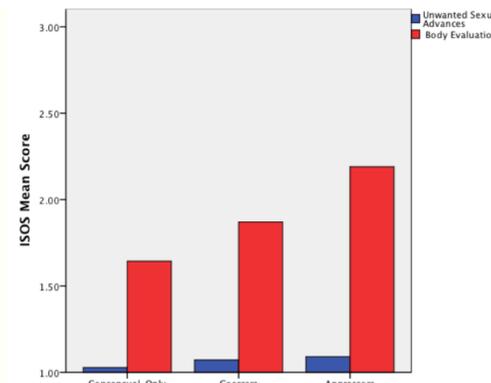


Figure 2. Women's reported perpetration of sexual objectification by sexual assault perpetration group.

Results

Logistic regression models were used to compare the three perpetration groups (consensual, coercers, aggressors), with analyses split by gender. With regard to reported objectification of others, men reported a mean body evaluation score of 2.26 ($SD = .65$) and a mean unwanted sexual advances score of 1.17 ($SD = .42$), while women reported a mean body evaluation score of 1.67 ($SD = .41$) and a mean unwanted sexual advances score of 1.04 ($SD = .15$). Men and women, respectively, were classified as engaging in consensual-only (72.5%, 80.1%), coercive (17.7%, 10.9%), or aggressive (9.7%, 5.4%) sexual acts. See Figures 1 and 2 for rates of sexual objectification by sexual assault perpetration group for men and women.

Sexual Objectification Predicting Consensual-Only vs. Coercers

For men, results indicated that the model was statistically significant (see Table 1), $\chi^2(2, N = 158) = 23.34, p < .001$ and that the predictors reliably distinguished sexually coercive from consensual-only groups. The model accounted for 21.8% of the variance in sexual coercion.

For women, results indicated that the model was statistically significant (see Table 2), $\chi^2(2, N = 243) = 7.92, p = .02$ and that the predictors reliably distinguished sexually coercive from consensual-only groups. The model accounted for 6.3% of the variance in sexual coercion.

Sexual Objectification Predicting Consensual-Only vs. Aggressors

For men, results indicated that the model was statistically significant (see Table 3), $\chi^2(2, N = 144) = 11.50, p < .01$ and that the predictors reliably distinguished sexually aggressive from consensual-only groups. The model accounted for 14.9% of the variance in sexual aggression.

For women, results of the analyses indicated that the model was statistically significant (see Table 4), $\chi^2(2, N = 226) = 16.78, p < .001$, and that the predictors reliably distinguished sexually aggressive from consensual-only groups. The model accounted for 22.2% of the variance in sexual aggression.

Sexual Objectification Predicting Coercers vs. Aggressors

For men, results of the analyses indicated that the model was statistically significant (see Table 5), $\chi^2(2, N = 48) = 6.61, p = .04$ and that the predictors reliably distinguished sexually aggressive from coercive groups. The model accounted for 17.7% of the variance in sexual violence.

For women, results of the analyses indicated that the model was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 39) = 3.73, p = .16$, and that the predictors did not reliably distinguish sexually aggressive from coercive groups.

Discussion

Findings revealed positive associations between sexual objectification and sexual assault perpetration, particularly among men, which is consistent with prior findings (Gervais, DiLillo, & McChargue, 2013; Rudman & Meschner, 2012). In partial support of our hypotheses, body evaluation, but not unwanted sexual advances, emerged as predictive of sexual coercion and aggression compared to consensual-only behavior. Consistent with our hypotheses, unwanted explicit sexual advances alone predicted sexual aggression compared to coercion; however, this finding was only true for men. Results also indicate that sexual objectification, in the form of body evaluation, differentiated sexual aggression and coercion from consensual-only behavior of both sexes. These findings indicate that engaging in sexual objectification is a risk factor for sexual perpetration committed by both men and women.

These findings indicate that prevention efforts focused on disrupting the link between objectification and perpetration may be useful in reducing incidences of sexual assault. For example, bystander training programs could help men and women recognize the subtle objectifying behaviors that may precede sexual assault and intervene before a potential perpetrator escalates to more extreme behaviors.

Another key finding was that, among men, engaging in greater unwanted sexual advances toward others differentially predicted sexual aggression as compared to sexual coercion. Most individuals who perpetrate sexual aggression have also used sexually coercion tactics to obtain sex, and prior work suggests that coercers and aggressors share many common characteristics (DeGue & DiLillo, 2004; Lyndon et al., 2007). However, researchers have also identified several factors that differentiate those who "cross the line" into using physical force to obtain sex (DeGue, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2010; Lyndon et al., 2007). The present study adds to this literature by suggesting that engaging in more extreme forms of sexual objectification may be an additional factor that differentiates sexual aggression from coercion. That is, sexual objectification that includes unwanted sexual advances may set the stage for "crossing the line" into more severe sexual perpetration—including use of physical force—in a way that milder objectification does not. It is possible, for example, that men who engage in unwanted sexual advances toward women also more completely reduce women to sexual objects who have the sole function of serving the desires of the objectifier. Further research could examine this further by assessing the relation between sexual objectifying behaviors and internal representations of others as sexual objects.

Overall, these findings add to a growing literature connecting sexual objectification to sexual assault perpetration, and suggest that the amount and severity of sexual objectification may relate in predictable ways to sexual assault perpetration. Limitations of this study include the use of retrospective self-report data, and the use of general ratings of sexual objectification and past sexual aggression, rather than situation-specific information. Future studies should aim to replicate findings using event-level data or laboratory tasks (e.g., utilizing eye-tracking technology to assess objectification preceding an aggression analogue task).