



# The Joint Effect of Acute Alcohol Intoxication and Sexual Assault Perpetration History on Objectifying a Confederate

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## Introduction

Sexual objectification occurs when women are reduced to their body parts and evaluated as instruments to be used by others (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Increased awareness of the costs of sexual objectification to women's well-being (see APA, 2007 for a review) has prompted research examining correlates of sexually objectifying behaviors in men. Surveys demonstrate that men who have a history of perpetrating sexual violence as well as greater alcohol consumption are more likely to objectify women via increased body evaluation (i.e., objectifying gazes) and unwanted sexual advances (e.g., Gervais, DiLillo, & McChargue, 2014).

Researchers have typically theorized sexual objectification as increasing risk for sexual perpetration; however, findings also suggest an alternative—that perpetrating sexual assault may reinforce men's beliefs that women's bodies exist primarily as instruments to be used by others, in turn increasing future objectification. Furthermore, the association between greater alcohol use and objectifying gaze may reflect a process of alcohol myopia (e.g., Steele & Josephs, 1990), in which alcohol intoxication increases men's attention to women's salient sexual attributes (e.g., breasts) compared to their less salient attributes (e.g., thoughts, feelings; e.g., Gervais et al., 2013).

As half of men who have sexually perpetrated report consuming alcohol just prior to perpetration (Abbey et al., 2004), this study sought to examine the joint effects of these variables on sexual objectification. As a means of expanding upon the design of previous survey studies, this lab-based experiment assessed the effect of history of sexual assault perpetration and acute alcohol intoxication on sexual objectification of a video-taped female confederate whom the participant believed was also currently participating in the study.

Drawing on the above theory and research, we propose the following hypotheses:

1. Greater sexual assault perpetration history will predict greater sexual objectification.
2. Alcohol intoxication will predict greater sexual objectification.
3. Sexual assault perpetration and acute alcohol intoxication will interact such that individuals in the alcohol condition who reported higher sexual assault perpetration will be more likely to focus on the confederate's sexual body parts while watching her on video.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 48 adult males recruited from a large Midwestern university (Mean age = 22.04,  $SD = 1.46$ ; range = 21-27). The majority of the participants identified as European American (77.1%).

### Measures

**Sexual Experiences Survey – Male Version (SES-M; Koss et al., 1987).** Self-report questionnaire containing 12 behaviorally specific questions assessing perpetration of unwanted sexual contact, verbally coerced intercourse, attempted rape, and rape since the age of 14. Responses were used to classify participants into two mutually exclusive categories: no history of sexual perpetration (responses of "never" to every item;  $n = 36$ ; 75%) and at least one coercive or aggressive sexual assault ( $n = 12$ ; 25%).

## Methods (cont.)

**Drinking condition:** Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants were randomly assigned to consume an alcohol or placebo beverage. Those in the alcohol condition received a dose of 1.06 g/kg of alcohol and achieved a breath alcohol context of approximately .08%. NIAAA guidelines for alcohol administration were followed (National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2005).

**Objectification questions:** Participants were led to believe they were interacting with a female confederate (Jessica) in a near-by room. After participants were given the opportunity to watch the confederate on video, they were asked four Likert-scale questions. These questions asked participants to rate the extent to which they focused on Jessica's (1) appearance, (2) sex appeal, (3) body, and (4) breasts (responses ranged 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*) to assess the degree to which they were sexually objectifying her on video. In the current study, the internal consistency of this scale was .90.

## Results

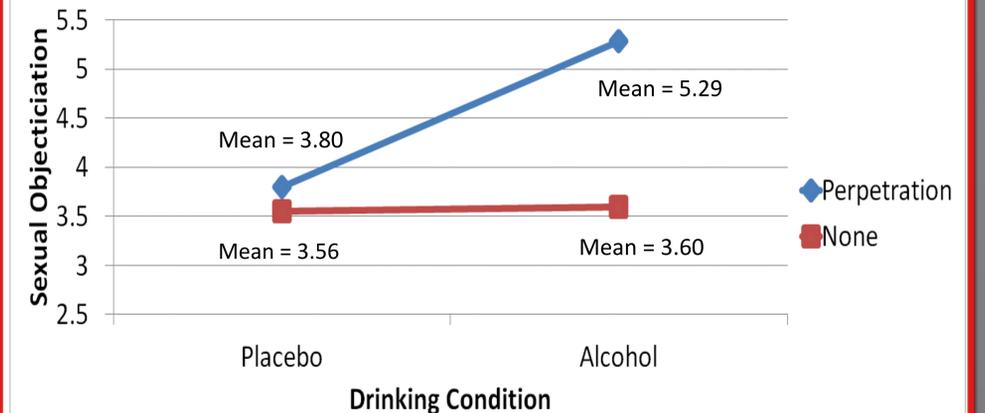
A between-group ANOVA was conducted with sexual perpetration and alcohol condition as the independent factors and sexual objectification as the dependent variable. Findings revealed a significant main effect of sexual assault perpetration on sexual objectification ( $F[1,44] = 5.39, p = .025$ ; **Hypothesis 1**), but no main effect of acute intoxication on sexual objectification ( $F[1,44] = 3.37, p = .073$ ; **Hypothesis 2**). Contrary to **Hypothesis 3**, sexual assault perpetration history and acute alcohol intoxication did not interact to increase participants' focus on the confederate's sexual body parts while watching her on video ( $F[1,44] = 3.01, p = 0.090$ ; see Figure).

Effect sizes (eta-squared) revealed that sexual assault perpetration explained 9.8% of the variance in the outcome, acute alcohol intoxication explained an additional 6.1% of the variance in the outcome, and the interaction explained a total of 5.4% of the variance in the outcome. Thus, while the interaction of alcohol intoxication and sexual perpetration history on sexual objectification was not statistically significant, the effect of the interaction on the outcome was of medium size (Miles & Shevlin, 2001; Richardson, 2011).



## Figure

Interaction of Drinking Condition and Sexual Perpetration History on Sexual Objectification



Note. Interaction is not significant,  $F[1,44] = 3.01, p = 0.090$ .

## Discussion

Our finding that sexual perpetration history is associated with greater sexual objectification is consistent with empirical evidence demonstrating links between increased objectification and the occurrence of sexual assault among both perpetrators (Gervais et al., 2014) and victims (e.g., Franz et al., 2015). Although sexual objectification has typically been conceptualized as occurring prior to sexual perpetration, the current study indicates that sexual perpetration history may also contribute to sexually objectifying behaviors, suggesting the possibility of a reciprocal relationship.

Findings did not reveal a significant direct effect of acute alcohol intoxication on sexual objectification, and sexual perpetration history and alcohol intoxication did not appear to interact to predict objectification. However, our ability to detect significant effects might have been hindered by low statistical power. Indeed, a medium effect size was found for the interaction. To address this issue, future work should include a larger and more diverse sample of men.

Future research might also examine other individual differences and contextual factors that increase risk for sexual objectification. Research involving event-level assessments of sexual objectification and sexual assault perpetration over time could provide valuable insight into within-person processes related to men's objectification of women. Findings suggest that men with a history of sexual assault perpetration may be at higher risk for engaging in less severe, yet still harmful sexually objectifying behaviors, which could be addressed by promoting primary prevention strategies in communities to increase awareness.