



# Sexual Objectification and Sexual Assault: Do Self-Objectification and Sexual Assertiveness Account for the Link?

Molly R. Franz, Michelle Haikalis, Sarah J. Gervais, David DiLillo  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln



## Introduction

- ❖ As many as 1 in 5 women experience rape or attempted rape in their lifetimes, and nearly half of women report other forms of sexual violence, such as sexual coercion (Black et al., 2011).
- ❖ Recent research grounded in objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) reveals significant positive associations between sexual objectification and sexual assault perpetration and victimization. These findings show that women who report experiencing objectification (e.g., being sexually ogled) are at greater risk for being assaulted (Haikalis et al., 2014). However, it is currently unclear *why* this relationship exists.
- ❖ Objectification theory suggests that experiencing frequent sexual objectification increases the risk that women will self-objectify (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Empirical research confirms this link, demonstrating that increased sexual objectification predicts greater self-objectification, particularly in the form of persistent body surveillance that involves habitual monitoring of one's appearance from the perspective of an outside observer (e.g., Kozee et al., 2007).
- ❖ Intense body surveillance may in turn undermine sexual assertiveness in unwanted sexual situations (Tolman, 2002). Support for this possibility comes from related work showing that self-objectification is associated with a diminished willingness to insist upon contraceptive use with sexual partners (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006) and a greater tendency to refrain from speaking when interacting with men (Saguy et al., 2010).
- ❖ The possibility that body surveillance weakens sexual assertiveness is concerning in light of evidence that low sexual assertiveness is a significant risk factor for sexual victimization (e.g., Livingston, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2007).

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

- ❖ First, we expected that greater sexual objectification will be associated with higher body surveillance, higher body surveillance will be associated with lower sexual assertiveness, and lower sexual assertiveness will be associated with greater sexual victimization. Furthermore, greater sexual objectification will be associated with greater sexual victimization.
- ❖ Next, we hypothesized that the relationship between sexual objectification and sexual victimization will be mediated by greater body surveillance and lower sexual assertiveness.

## Method

### Measures

**Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS; Kozee et al., 2007).** The 11-item ISOS body evaluation scale was used to assess the frequency with which women had experienced sexual objectification by others. Items on the ISOS are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *almost always*). The internal consistency of this subscale was .94.

**Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; McKinley & Hyde, 1996).** The 8-item OBCS body surveillance scale was used to assess women's tendencies to persistently monitor their appearance. Items on the OBCS are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The internal consistency of this subscale was .81.

**Sexual Assertiveness Scale (SAS; Morokoff et al., 1997).** The 6-item SAS Refusal Assertiveness subscale was used to assess women's sexual assertiveness specifically related to refusal of unwanted sexual acts. Items on the SAS are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always, 100% of the time*). The internal consistency of this subscale was .70.

**Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss & Oros, 1982).** The SES is a self-report questionnaire containing 10 behaviorally specific items assessing unwanted sexual contact, verbally coerced intercourse, attempted rape, and rape experiences experienced since the age of 14. Items on the SES are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *often*). Responses were used to classify participants into two mutually exclusive categories: no history of sexual victimization ( $n = 182$ ; 61.3%) and at least one sexual assault experience ( $n = 115$ ; 37.6%).

## Participants and Procedure

Participants were 297 female undergraduates from a Midwestern university, ranging in age from 17-30 years ( $M = 19.10$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). The majority of participants identified as European American (85.7%), but also Asian American (5.6%), Latina (4.0%), African American (2.3%), or another race/ethnicity (2.3%). Questionnaires were administered via an online survey in exchange for course credit.

Table 1.  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for All Variables*

	<i>M (SD) or %</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Body Evaluation ( $N = 295$ )	26.00 (8.14)	-			
2. Body Surveillance ( $N = 291$ )	36.37 (8.22)	.18**	-		
3. Sexual Assertiveness ( $N = 295$ )	24.06 (4.97)	-.15*	-.23***	-	
4. Sexual Victimization ( $N = 297$ )	38.7% (endorsed)	.36***	.12*	-.22***	-

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

## Results

- ❖ **Hypothesis 1:** We first examined the bivariate correlations across all variables (see Table 1). As expected, more frequent sexual objectification was positively associated with both sexual victimization and body surveillance. Body surveillance was negatively associated with sexual assertiveness; higher body self-monitoring predicted lower sexual assertiveness. Finally, assertiveness was negatively associated with sexual victimization; lower sexual assertiveness in unwanted sexual situations predicted greater sexual victimization.
- ❖ **Hypothesis 2:** We next conducted path analyses using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012) to examine whether the relationship between sexual objectification and sexual victimization was mediated by body surveillance and sexual assertiveness. Maximum likelihood logistic regression was used to compute direct and indirect effects of sexual objectification on sexual victimization, with body surveillance and sexual assertiveness as sequential mediators (see Figure 1).
- ❖ Results indicated a direct effect of sexual objectification on sexual assault (OR = 1.102 [95% CI = 1.064, 1.141]). Further, sexual objectification was related to sexual victimization indirectly through body surveillance and sexual assertiveness (OR = 1.002 [95% CI = 1.001, 1.005]). The indirect path model produced a Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.209$ .

## Discussion

- ❖ Frederickson and Roberts (1997) theorize that sexual objectification exists on a continuum, and in the extreme may manifest in sexual assault. Our finding that more experiences of sexual objectification predicted increased sexual victimization supports this assertion and is consistent with emerging research showing a link between increased objectification and the occurrence of sexual assault among both perpetrators (Gervais et al., 2014) and victims (Haikalis et al., 2014).
- ❖ Our mediation model elucidates a potentially important pathway from sexual objectification to sexual victimization. Results show that women who are recurrently objectified may increasingly define their bodies for the purpose of serving others. This internalization of another's perspective in turn may undermine one's ability to respond assertively during unwanted sexual encounters. Because the capability to assert one's sexual desires can serve as a protective factor against assault, passivity in response to unwanted sexual situations may increase risk for sexual victimization.
- ❖ Sexual objectification continued to predict victimization even in the presence of mediators. This finding indicates that linkages between experiences of objectification and increased sexual assault are likely to be complex and mediated by a number of intervening variables.
- ❖ Limitations include: (a) use of cross-sectional data, which does not permit conclusions about the causal relations between variables and (b) a relatively homogenous sample of college students, which limits generalizability.
- ❖ Future research should examine other mechanisms that may contribute to the association between objectification and victimization, including alcohol use that may enhance objectification of women (Gervais et al., 2014). Research involving event-level assessments of sexual objectification and sexual victimization over time could also provide valuable insight into within-person processes.
- ❖ Findings suggest that interventions aimed at changing the culture of female objectification would help disrupt the links between milder objectifying behaviors and more extreme sexual assault behaviors. In particular, bystander interventions could be used to help men and women recognize subtle objectifying behaviors that trigger this sequence of events and intervene when they occur.
- ❖ A secondary point of intervention could involve teaching women to combat the tendency to internalize others' views, particularly in situations where they are being objectified. Programs aimed at promoting embodiment (i.e., body awareness and responsiveness) hold promise for helping women decrease persistent body monitoring (Impett, Daubenmaier, & Hirschman, 2006), and could be adapted for women who struggle with an objectified view of self to help bolster assertiveness.

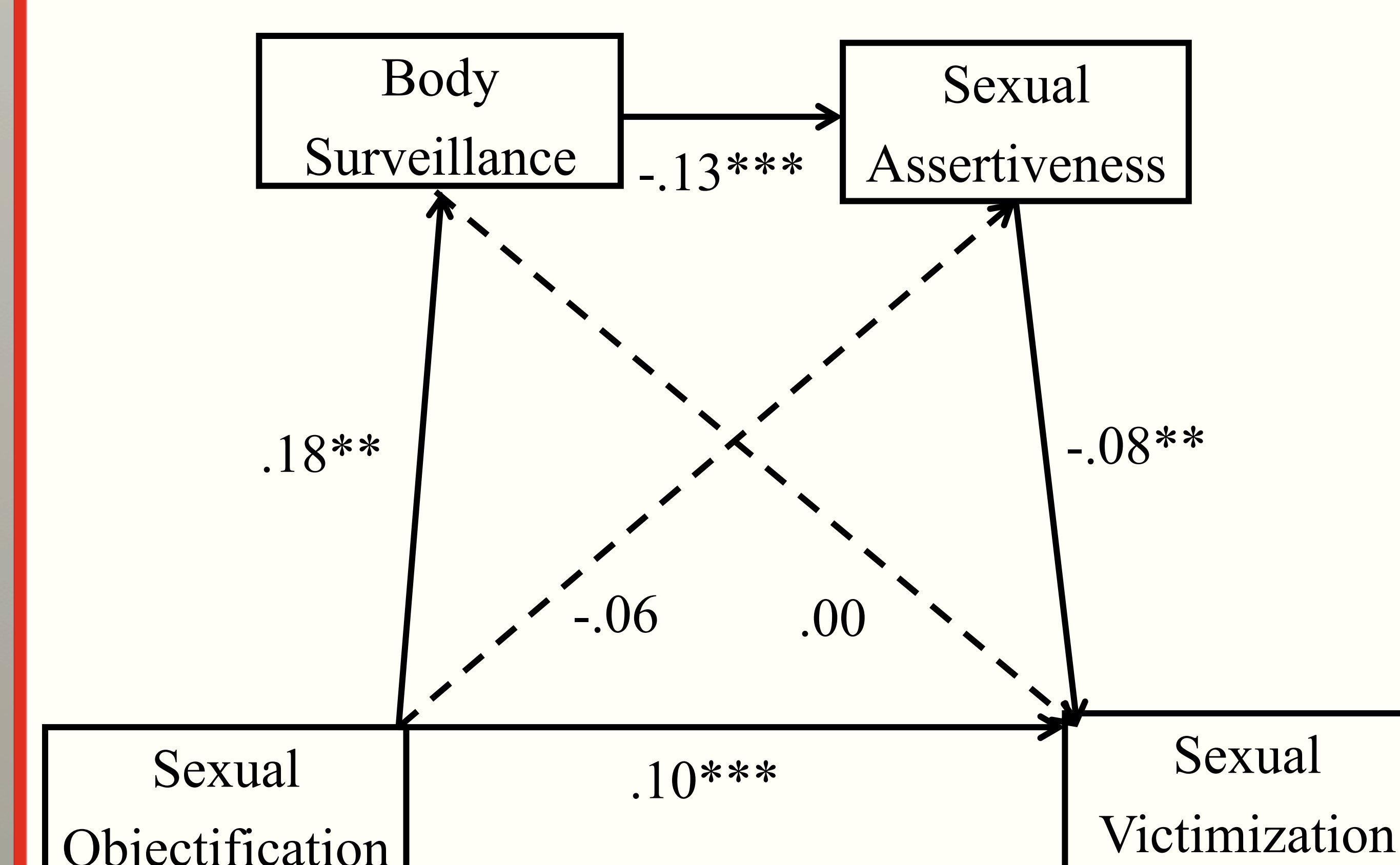


Fig. 1. Unstandardized regression coefficients (B) in path model depicting the influence of sexual objectification, body surveillance, and sexual assertiveness on sexual victimization \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

