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**Media Sexualization and its Effects on Perceptions of Sex and Sexuality in Female College Students**

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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**Abstract**

Social and traditional media are often studied in relation to women's perceptions of sex. However, they are often studied separately instead of together, missing the overall connection of media on attitudes. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between media consumption, specifically social media and television, and college-aged women's levels of internalized sexualization. The findings of this study found a significant positive correlation between time spent consuming romanced-based reality television and romantic comedies and higher levels of internalized sexualization in college-aged women. This study also found there to be a significant positive correlation between college women's usage of Instagram and their levels of internalized sexualization. These findings suggest that there is a significant relationship between time spent on Instagram, consumption of romance-based reality television and romantic comedies, and higher levels of internalized sexualization.

*Keywords:* social media, internalized sexualization, media consumption

## **Media Sexualization and its Effects on Perceptions of Sex and Sexuality in Female College Students**

In recent years the world has seen an unprecedented evolution in technology and media consumption with the sudden growth of easily accessible media such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video, as well as the ever-changing world of social media. As our access to not only social media but also television media and information has evolved at such a rapid rate it can feel difficult to accurately capture the way this access to media, and increase in media consumption, can influence the way one views the world around them. This feels especially relevant with the increase in social media content and first-person content being shared online. Over this past year specifically, weekly time spent watching television increased by one billion hours (Nielsen, 2020). The present study sets out to investigate the relationship between media consumption and internalized ideas and perceptions regarding sex and sexuality in young women.

### **Access to Media**

In the past, the only way for someone to watch their favorite show was when it came on every week with new episodes, someone could maybe DVR it or, even further back, tape their favorite show or movie to watch over and over again. But now, people have access to these mediums right in their back pockets. For instance, a study conducted in 2016 found that young adults aged 18-34 spend nearly seven hours a week using tv connected devices (Nielsen, 2016). It is also imperative that when discussing access to media that access to social media is considered. Young people today have never lived in a world without some form of social media. The average freshman entering college in 2021 was born in 2003, the same year that Myspace

was founded. Facebook, which today boasts nearly 2.9 million users, was founded only a year later. A research report published in 2015 found that nearly 90% of emerging adults (i.e., adults between the ages of) indicated using social media daily (Perrin, 2015). Having never lived without social media and using it nearly every day, it is clear that measures of media usage should include social media in addition to traditional television-based media. The present study investigates the impacts of social media and traditional media, referring to television programs including those distributed via streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, together.

### **Influence of Media**

Researchers have found that consuming media influences the way people view not only themselves but the world around them. For instance, Kaur and Bashir conducted a study in 2015 where they explored both positive and negative effects of social media and noted positive effects such as enhanced learning opportunities, accessing health information, and socialization and communication. Multiple studies have reported negative effects from the use of social media including, a decline in self-worth, negative body image, self-esteem, eating disorder symptoms, and higher depressive symptom scores (Kelly et al., 2018, Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017, Shensa et al., 2020). It is important to recognize that social media is social, meaning it does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, the people utilizing social media are interacting with other people and are consistently receiving ideas about themselves from those on social media with them or who they follow.

Traditional media such as film and television are not exempt from the negative effects and associations that also come along with social media. There has been substantial research on how media affects all aspects of mental health but specifically, there has been a great deal of

research on how it affects the body image of young women and men alike. One study found that media consumption significantly predicts women's eating disorder symptomatology, and for men, whether or not they have a personal thin ideal and attitudes toward dieting as well (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Additionally, research has found that greater consumption of women's magazines, reality tv, and tv comedies are associated with greater levels of self-sexualization and in turn associated with negative feelings about one's sexual experience and sexual self-efficacy (Ward et al., 2017).

**Sexualization in the media.** In a 2007 task force put together to discuss the sexualization of girls, the American Psychological Association defined sexualization to be occurring when a person's value does not come from characteristics such as personality, but rather their sexual appeal and their sexual activity. A person is being sexually objectified, made into an object for others' sexual use instead of a person with the capacity for decision making (American Psychological Association, 2007).

Regarding media specifically, researchers have found a significant increase in sexualization in the media in recent decades. Specifically, there has been a significant increase in sexualization on television shows (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008). While people of all genders fall victim to sexualization, women are the most common targets of sexualization in the media. Research shows that in the 1940's less than fifty percent of women portrayed in the media were portrayed sexually, whereas, in the 2000s, that number rose to over eighty percent (Ward et al., 2017). In a study where researchers sampled thirty-two episodes of top ten children's programs, they found an average of twenty-four sexual incidents per program, with 72% of the sexualizing content targeting women specifically (McDade-Montez et al., 2016). These statistics indicate that

even if one is not consuming traditional media regularly, they are still more than likely to encounter sexualization and objectification of women.

**Sexualization in Social Media.** Traditional media is far from the only sexualized medium people are consuming. As social media is a newer form of media relative to that of traditional media there is considerably less research on sexualization in social media. While there has been much less research on sexualization in social media, there has been some data collected to show a pattern of sexualized social media being present and fairly prominent. A study conducted in 2017 on “fitspo” or fitness inspiration influencers, found that the female influencers were more likely to have their whole body showing, their butt emphasized, and to be more sexual than their male counterparts (Carrotte et al., 2017). Some research has found that women who post more sexualized content on social media platforms, specifically Instagram, generally have more friends/followers and receive more likes on their posts than those who do not post sexualized photos (Ramsey & Horan, 2018). This study shows that there are positive associations with self-sexualizing oneself on social media. Another study conducted amongst adolescents aged 16-19 found that young girls were more likely than their male peers to have “seductive” profile photos on their profile (Kapidizic & Herring, 2014). With sexualized media being so commonplace, it becomes a question of how the media in question affects those consuming it, specifically how it affects the young people who are far more likely to be consuming this media.

**Internalization.** In a 2015 article, Zittoun and Gillespie described internalization as a process in which culture becomes the mind, meaning that what is viewed as valuable and important to the culture we are in is what we begin to view as valuable in our own mind. Internalization is crucial to discuss the effects of sexualized media. Internalization can take many

forms and be influenced by many different aspects of our culture, but with sexualized media, it is important to define internalized sexualization. Internalized sexualization is the internalized belief in women that their sexual attractiveness to men is a crucial part of their identity (McKenny & Bigler, 2016).

**Emerging Adults.** Emerging adulthood is a concept first proposed by Jeffery Arnett in the year 2000; Arnett posited that the years of 18-25 are separate from and distinctly different from adolescence and young adulthood. Research has shown that exposure to highly sexualized media is correlated with emerging adults and adolescents' attitudes and behaviors surrounding sex (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Another study found that adolescents who were one standard deviation above the average interaction with sexualized media of all types were 70%-75% more likely to participate in sexual intercourse than that of their peers who have much less exposure to sexual media (Collins et al., 2011). A 2017 study found that adolescents' willingness to engage in casual sex through descriptive peer norms of casual sex could be predicted by exposure to sexually oriented reality TV such as Jersey Shore (van Oosten et al., 2016). The conversation around media influences not only involves how young people view sex or choose to take part in sex; research has found that adolescents' exposure to sexualized media is strongly associated with whether they are likely to view women as sex objects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007).

Generation Z and the later end of Millennials are in a unique place when it comes to media prevalence in their lives. These generations will be the first generations to live their entire life on and with social media and with the greater accessibility to media such as television and film. But they will not be the last generation to live with this level of media access.

Understanding the effect this exposure will have on this generation will give us a better



understanding of what is to come for future generations. It is also important to acknowledge that the sexualization of women at this age and the things they are feeling now is what they may carry into their future and potentially show to their own children one day. A 2012 study showed that high media exposure and a maternal figure with high levels of self-objectification puts young girls at a greater risk for self-sexualization at a young age (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Thus, what happens in generation z and millennials gives us ideas about generations to come and influences the generations to come.

### **Present Study**

It is evident that the media we consume may be related to objectification and sexualization (e.g., van Oosten et al., 2016). The current study investigates if sexualized media is related to young college-aged women's perceptions of internalized sexism specifically. In this study, we expect to find that participants who are spending more time on average consuming both traditional media and utilizing social media apps (e.g., Youtube and Tik Tok), will be more likely to have higher internalized beliefs and pressures regarding their sexuality. Alternatively, we expect those who spend less time consuming traditional and new media to not have as much internalized feelings and internalized pressure regarding their sexuality. As such I hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 1:* College women who spend more time on social media will have higher levels of internalized sexualization.

*Hypothesis 2:* College women who spend more time watching traditional media will have higher levels of internalized sexualization.

### **Method**

## Participants

A total of 140 people accessed the survey, however, per study parameters (cisgender women between the ages of 18 and 20), the total number of participants included in the final sample size was 102. Removed participants identified as male (2), transgender (2), were outside the age range (31) or failed to complete the survey (3). The average age of participants in this study was 19.11 years old ( $SD = .76$ ). A majority of participants reported their age as being nineteen years old at 42%, then twenty years old at 35%, and 23% of participants reported being eighteen years old. Among participants, 82.4% identified as white, 7.8% identified as Black or African American, 4.9% identified as multiracial, 2.9% of the participants self-identified as Hispanic or Latino and the final 2% of participants self-identified as Asian American or Asian women. A majority of participants identified as heterosexual (73.5%); 12.7% of the participants identified as bisexual, 6.9% of participants chose to self-describe, using labels such as queer and pansexual, and the final two participants identified as asexual and prefer not to answer. For this study participants were required to be in the age range of 18-20.

## Materials

**Demographics.** I gathered information on participants' race, religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, and year in school.

**Media Consumption.** In this study, media consumption was measured by creating a scale based on a television-watching scale created by Harrison and Cantor (1997). They presented six popular television programs separated into three categories, regarding women's body types on the television show, measured on a 0-4 Likert scale from never watched to regularly watched. For the present study, four television shows and three social media websites

were chosen to be measured. The shows included in the study were: Sex Education, Euphoria, Shameless, and Bridgerton. The three social media websites included in the study were Tik Tok, Instagram, and YouTube.

Time spent consuming romance-specific genres was measured by asking how frequently they are viewing romantic comedies and romance-based reality television on a 1-5 Likert scale from never to very often. These questions are based on a modified version of a scale created by Van den Bulck (2004), where they measured fear of crime based on time spent watching fictional television.

**Sexualization.** Levels of internalized sexualization were measured in this study using a modified version of McKenney's (2010) Internalized Sexualization scale. This scale was modified to better fit the language and thought processes used by college students, as the original scale was created for use with pre and early adolescent girls. Some of the questions include "I have found myself comparing my own sexual behavior to that of television characters" or "I have felt internal pressure to wear sexualized clothing." These questions were answered on a five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree.

## **Procedure**

Before the participants began, they were asked to provide their consent to participate in the study. After consenting, the participants were asked to answer demographic-related questions. Upon completing the demographic questions participants were then be given the media consumption scale which they were to complete before moving on to the next portion of the survey. Upon finishing the media consumption scales, participants completed the modified

McKenney scale. Upon completing the survey, the participants were thanked for their participation and received their course extra credit.

## **Results**

A Pearson's  $r$  correlation test was conducted to find if there was a significant correlation between media consumption, defined as four specific television series (Bridgerton, Sex Ed, Shameless, and Euphoria), three social media applications (Tik Tok, Instagram, and YouTube), and generalized time watching romantic comedies and romance-based reality tv, and college-aged women's internalized sexualization. All results are located in Table 1. A significant positive correlation was found between internalized sexualization and time spent on Instagram, indicating that those who spend more time on Instagram had higher levels of internalized sexualization. A significant positive correlation was also found between internalized sexism and time spent consuming romance-based reality television and romantic comedies, indicating that those who reported consuming more romance-based reality tv and romantic comedies are more likely to have higher levels of internalized sexualization. No other significant correlations were found between internalized sexualization and measures of media consumption. However, there was a significant positive correlation between time spent watching romance-based reality television and usage of Tik Tok such that those who spend more time-consuming romance-based reality television also spent more time on Tik Tok. Time spent watching the television show Bridgerton was also found to be significantly positively correlated with time spent watching romantic comedies.

## **Discussion**

Usage of Instagram was correlated with higher levels of internalized sexualization, overall the more participants used Instagram the higher their levels of internalized sexualization. While Instagram is a more personalized social media as people can choose who to follow, TikTok has an algorithm picking what you see. Because people can choose who they follow on Instagram, they may not be as exposed to sexualized media if the people they follow may not engage in sexualized content postings. However, previous research has found that women who post more sexualized content on apps, such as Instagram, receive more likes and tend to have more followers than those who do not (Ramsey & Horan, 2018), making it likely that most people are following at least one person who posts sexualized content. Research into the fitness and dieting genre of Instagram found that female fitness posts were more likely to be sexualized than the posts by their male counterparts (Carrotte et al., 2017). Without even purposefully looking for sexualized content on Instagram there is a likelihood that people using the app for any significant amount of time will find it. Instagram being related to internalized sexualization in young women, can point to the idea that apps like this demonstrate to young women that their sexuality is what makes them valuable to others, it is what will give them more “likes” and “followers.”

Those who reported that they spent more time watching romance-based reality television also had higher levels of internalized sexualization. Shows like the Bachelor franchise, Love Island, and Too Hot to Handle are television shows that have all been critiqued in the past and present for how they are presenting topics of love, sex, and sexuality to their young viewer base (Morris, 2017, Shepherd, 2018). Previous research has criticized Love Island specifically for perpetuating sexual double standards that men should always want sex but women who want sex

are not desirable (Denby, 2021). A common theme amongst many romance-based reality television shows is turning love into a competition, making it to the “fantasy suite” and getting to sleep together in the bachelor is a milestone for the women on the show. This idea that competition and games are involved in love may play a role in the internalized sexualization of the young women watching these shows. It is also important to consider the “reality” portion of these programs; reality television is not actors playing characters in the traditional way that fictional television programs do, potentially leading to the assumption when one is watching these shows is that they are watching real people in real-life situations. It makes the competition involved in sex and the romance a reality to the people watching, if these thirty gorgeous women are all competing for the time of a man in gorgeous outfits and fighting over him that's real life because they are real people.

There was no significant correlation found between internalized sexualization and any of the more specific television shows used as variables in the study, such as Euphoria and Bridgerton. There was also no significant correlation found between time spent consuming YouTube and TikTok and internalized sexualization. There could be many reasons behind why there was no significant correlation between these variables and internalized sexualization. Asking about watching times of specific shows such as Euphoria, Shameless, Bridgerton, and Sex Ed may have been too specific of questions to be asking the participants. For instance, with the broad label of romantic comedies, participants were not given any examples of romantic comedies in a similar way to romance-based reality television, which was also positively and significantly correlated with internalized sexualization. It may have been that no correlation was found between the television shows mentioned because they were merely not the specific shows

being watched by the participants in this study. It is also important to note that reality television is real people that the participants might also follow on Instagram and Twitter, whereas on shows such as Euphoria and Bridgerton the participants know that those are actors playing sexualized characters. With YouTube and TikTok there is such a vast array of content, that it is hard to determine whether the content participants are watching on these applications is sexualized content or content where women are being sexualized, especially as recommendations are made from watch history (e.g., someone who watches TikToks of animals is less likely to see TikToks of sexualized content due to the algorithm).

It is important to note that the significant positive correlations found are just correlations. These correlations are not directional in nature, meaning that we are not able to determine whether the media consumption of the participants is what is influencing their higher levels of internalized sexualization. What may in fact be happening could be the opposite, our participants with higher levels of internalized sexualization may in fact be seeking out more sexualized media. It is important to consider the idea that participants with higher levels of internalized sexualization are seeking out shows such as romance reality television that might mirror the ideas, they hold about themselves. Sexualized television and media like *The Bachelor* and *Too Hot to Handle*, portray the idea that women who are sexually appealing to men have more intrinsic value than women who are not sexually appealing to men. The correlation between internalized sexualization and romance-based reality television and romantic comedies might be due to people with higher levels of sexualization seeking out content that is validating their own beliefs. The same assumption could be made about Instagram's positive significant correlation with internalized sexualization. On Instagram, the user picks who they follow, so it could be

thought that those with higher levels of internalized sexualization might seek out more sexualized content on their social media apps. It is important to further investigate the directionality of these correlations.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study was conducted amongst a very small population of predominantly heterosexual, white college-aged cisgender women. In the future, it would be important for this research to be continued on a more diverse population, and in a more robust study where sexuality and gender identity are able to be considered. It is also important to note that these were correlations found amongst levels of internalized sexualization, it was not an experimental study and cannot confirm causality. Future research should look into the causal nature of this relationship to determine whether internalized sexualization is caused by this media consumption or if those with higher levels of internalized sexualization might be seeking out this content.

In the future, more in-depth research on not only levels of internalized sexualization but sexual beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions of peers' sexual behaviors in correlation to exposure to sexualized media and internalized sexualization, should be conducted. Further research on the topic of internalized sexualization and its correlations to media consumption, specifically sexualized media consumption, should be conducted on a young population as well. Looking at high school-age students and their relationship with internalized sexualization, and the media they are consuming and exposed to could lead to more information about why the results from college-age women turned out the way that they did. It is also important for future research to consider the sexual orientation of the participants as well.





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**Table 1***Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among main variables*

	<i>M/SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ISS (1)	2.84/0.48	--									
Rom-Com (2)	3.25/1.12	.23*	--								
Romantic Reality TV (3)	2.73/1.31	.30**	.45**	--							
SexEd (4)	1.63/0.99	<-.01	.03	-.12	--						
Bridgerton (5)	1.78/1.16	.001	.24*	.19	.07	--					
Euphoria (6)	2.28/1.31	.19	.06	.13	.34**	.11	--				
Shameless (7)	2.09/1.12	.10	-.07	-.01	.32**	-.15	.39**	--			
Insta (8)	4.29/1.08	.23*	.12	.17	.06	.09	.11	-.19	--		
Youtube (9)	3.19/1.15	-.04	-.20	-.02	.08	-.05	.08	.02	-.02	--	
TikTok (10)	4.51/1.07	.13	.13	.20*	.07	.08	.11	.04	.26**	.09	--

*Note:* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .  $N = 99-102$ . ISS = Internalized Sexualization Scale.