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Perceived Attractiveness of Sexualized Versus Non-sexualized Females on Online Dating Apps

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Abstract: Sexualization on social media has become a popular and noteworthy trend. While some scholars have examined the influence of sexualization on ratings of others' attractiveness, previous research has not included direct comparisons between genders, and most studies focused on Western contexts. Therefore, this study investigates the perceived attractiveness of sexualized versus non-sexualized females on online dating apps in China. A total of 218 participants, including 104 males and 114 females aged 18-30 were recruited to complete the online questionnaire and evaluate the attractiveness of either the sexualized or non-sexualized female profile owners. The results indicated certain negative impacts of sexualization on others' attractiveness ratings. Both males and females evaluated sexualized female profile owners as possessing less task attractiveness, and males also rated them less socially and physically attractive. However, the gender disparity signifies that women may adopt a sexualized image as an ideal self, intensifying self-objectification and causing negative effects.

Keywords: sexualization, online dating apps, attractiveness, gender difference

1. Introduction

In recent years, a new trend has emerged in mainstream media: depictions of women often tend to emphasize their physical beauty and sexual tension, also known as sexualization [1]. However, evidence has shown that sexualized presentations on social media might lead to negative impacts on others' evaluations [2]. As online dating apps have become one of the most used social media types and have become increasingly popular since the COVID-19 outbreak, this study aims to explore the perceived social, physical, and task attractiveness of sexualized versus non-sexualized females on online dating apps [3].

The Ambivalent Sexism Theory might be used to predict the results of social and physical attractiveness. Women who fit traditional gender stereotypes that appear weak, fragile, nurturing, and pure such as mothers and homemakers, are seen as good women and be treated with benevolent sexism [3,4]. In contrast, women who seem to challenge traditional gender roles and males' power, such as career women and lesbians, are classified as bad women and be treated with hostile sexism [3,4]. Therefore, sexualized women with revealing clothing go against the stereotype that women should dress modestly and purely and may be seen as using their bodies to seduce men for their power. As a result, sexualized women might be perceived as having less social and physical attractiveness.

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Several studies have verified this conjecture. Daniels' study found that males rated significantly lower on social and physical attractiveness for sexualized female profile owners than non-sexualized ones [2]. Meanwhile, both adolescent girls and young adult women judged their female peers who are sexualized as having less social and physical attractiveness than those who are non-sexualized [5]. Hence, for this study, sexualized women are expected to be rated lower on social and physical attractiveness by both males and females.

The Stereotype Content Model suggests that people utilize warmth and competence as critical dimensions to comprehend individuals or groups [3]. However, when a woman is presented in sexualized ways, her body is seen as an object merely for sexual use and pleasure, which diminishes her traits of a human being, and therefore might lower her perceived competence (task attractiveness) [2,3]. Previous studies were in line with this model and proved that sexualized women are considered less competent [2,5]. Therefore, this study expected that both males and females would evaluate sexualized female profile owners as having less task attractiveness. In addition, as all the participants are heterosexual and the candidates are females, the hypothesis was that males would rate higher than females on all types of attractiveness for both sexualized and non-sexualized photos.

Although some scholars have studied the impact of sexualization on others' attractiveness ratings, previous studies lacked direct gender comparisons, and most studies were conducted in Western environments, while the cultural differences between China and the West may affect the results. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceived attractiveness of sexualized versus non-sexualized females on online dating apps in China.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample of the study included a total of 218 participants aged 18-30 years old, 104 men and 114 women. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, and each participant received a payment of US$0.43 to complete the online questionnaire, advertised as a survey about dating apps.

2.2. Stimulus Material

Four Tinder profiles from two female candidates were used for this study, in which Candidate A's image was computer-generated using AI technology, and Candidate B was a real volunteer. There were two types of questionnaires, each containing two sexualized (in swimsuits with breasts exposed) or non-sexualized (lifestyle) photos of Candidates A and B, respectively.

2.3. Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned to either the sexualized (107 participants) or the non-sexualized questionnaire (111 participants). Before evaluating the attractiveness of Candidates A and B respectively, participants were asked to provide their gender and ages.

2.4. Measures

Fifteen items were modified from the Interpersonal Attraction Scale proposed by McCroskey and McCain, and the questions were identical for the sexualized and non-sexualized questionnaires [6]. Each type of attraction consisted of five items, and higher scores indicated higher perceived attractiveness. Participants evaluated the social attractiveness (e.g., "She would be pleasant to be with."), physical attractiveness (e.g., "I think she is quite pretty."), and task attractiveness (e.g., "I have confidence in her ability to get the job done.") of either the sexualized or non-sexualized photos of Candidate A and B using 7-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree;7=strongly agree). As for

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social attractiveness, Cronbach's α was 0.87 for Candidate A and 0.85 for Candidate B. Of the five questions that measure physical attractiveness, Cronbach'sα was 0.85 for both Candidate A and Candidate B. Cronbach's α for both Candidate A and Candidate B was 0.85 for task attractiveness.

2.5. Data Analysis

After collecting the data, each participant's attractiveness evaluation for sexualized or non-sexualized photos of Candidates A and B was obtained. Gender and sexualization were between-subject factors, and the candidate was a within-subject variable. Therefore, this study used three-way mixed ANOVA in IBM SPSS Statistics 26 for data analysis.

3. Results

The primary statistical analyses were 2×2×2 ANOVA, with participants' gender, candidate, and sexualization as the factors. The descriptive statistics are as Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics.

1=male, 2=female		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Social attractiveness of candidate	Male	208	24.8702	6.61191	0.45845
	Female	228	22.1404	7.20239	0.47699
Physical attractiveness of candidate	Male	208	24.9615	6.74723	0.46784
	Female	228	23.2500	7.20094	0.47689
Task attractiveness of candidate	Male	208	24.5240	6.92467	0.48014
	Female	228	22.8684	7.42304	0.49160
Total attractiveness of candidate	Male	208	74.3558	19.42428	1.34683
	Female	228	68.2588	20.64806	1.36745
Social attractiveness of candidate	sexualized	214	21.7944	7.07935	0.48393
	non-sexualized	222	25.0315	6.66550	0.44736
Physical attractiveness of candidate	sexualized	214	22.1262	7.38276	0.50468
	non-sexualized	222	25.9369	6.13613	0.41183
Task attractiveness of candidate	sexualized	214	21.1822	7.26620	0.49671
	non-sexualized	222	26.0450	6.34939	0.42614
Total attractiveness of candidate	sexualized	214	65.1028	20.84841	1.42517
	non-sexualized	222	77.0135	17.90939	1.20200

3.1. Social Attractiveness

Table 2: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Social Attractiveness).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	239943.523	1	239943.523	2843.561	.000

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Table 2: (continued).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender	827.451	1	827.451	9.806	.002
Sexualization	1229.509	1	1229.509	14.571	.000
Gender * Sexualization	315.726	1	315.726	3.742	.054
Error	18057.608	214	84.381		

Table 3: Tests of Within-Subjects Effects (Social Attractiveness).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Candidate	0.771	1	0.771	0.13	0.719
Candidate * Gender	2.496	1	2.496	0.421	0.517
Candidate * Sexualization	0.347	1	0.347	0.059	0.809
Candidate * Gender * Sexualization	2.863	1	2.863	0.483	0.488
Error (Candidate)	1268.992	214	5.93		

As for social attractiveness, the main effect of gender was statistically significant, $F(1, 214) = 9.806$, $p<0.05$ (see Table 2). Males ($M=24.87$) rated significantly higher on social attractiveness for the candidates than females ($M=22.14$) (see Table 1). There was also a main effect of sexualization on social attractiveness, $F(1, 214) = 14.571$, $p<0.05$ (see Table 2). Participants' social attractiveness ratings for the candidates' non-sexualized photos ($M=25.03$) were significantly higher than for sexualized photos ($M=21.79$) (see Table 1). The main effect of candidate was non-significant (see Table 3). Candidate A's perceived social attractiveness did not differ significantly from Candidate B's. In addition, there were neither two-way nor three-way interaction effects (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 4: Pairwise Comparisons 1 (Social Attractiveness).

1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(I) 1=male, 2=female	(J) 1=male, 2=female	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
sexualized	Male	Female	1.055	1.256	.402	-1.422	3.531
	Female	Male	-1.055	1.256	.402	-3.531	1.422
non-sexualized	Male	Female	4.463*	1.235	.000	2.028	6.898
	Female	Male	-4.463*	1.235	.000	-6.898	-2.028

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Table 5: Pairwise Comparisons 2 (Social Attractiveness).

1=male, 2=female	(I) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(J) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	sexualized	non-sexualized	-5.067*	1.274	.000	-7.578	-2.556
	non-sexualized	sexualized	5.067*	1.274	.000	2.556	7.578
Female	sexualized	non-sexualized	-1.659	1.217	.174	-4.059	.741
	non-sexualized	sexualized	1.659	1.217	.174	-.741	4.059

Simple effect analysis showed that for non-sexualized photos of the candidates, males rated significantly higher on social attractiveness than females (see Table 4). However, there was no gender difference in social attractiveness when evaluating sexualized photos (see Table 4). In addition, males rated significantly higher on social attractiveness for non-sexualized photos than sexualized photos, while females' ratings for sexualized and non-sexualized photos did not differ significantly (see Table 5).

3.2. Physical Attractiveness

Table 6: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Physical Attractiveness).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	252231.998	1	252231.998	2995.372	.000
Gender	334.287	1	334.287	3.970	.048
Sexualization	1662.245	1	1662.245	19.740	.000
Gender * Sexualization	248.747	1	248.747	2.954	.087
Error	18020.350	214	84.207		

Table 7: Tests of Within-Subjects Effects (Physical Attractiveness).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Candidate	21.996	1	21.996	3.714	0.055
Candidate * Gender	1.642	1	1.642	0.277	0.599

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Table 7: (continued).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Candidate * Sexualization	25.918	1	25.918	4.376	0.038
Candidate * Gender* Sexualization	0.775	1	0.775	0.131	0.718
Error (Candidate)	1267.38	214	5.922		

Regarding physical attractiveness, there was a main effect of gender, F (1, 214) =3.970, p=0.048<0.05, such that males' (M=24.96) physical attractiveness ratings for the candidates were significantly higher than females' (M=23.25) (see Tables 6 and 1). The main effect of sexualization was also significant, F (1, 214) =19.740, p=0.00<0.05, such that participants rated significantly higher on physical attractiveness for candidates' non-sexualized photos (M=25.94) than sexualized photos (M=22.13) (see Tables 6 and 1). The main effect of candidate was not significant (see Table 7). The interaction effect of candidate and sexualization was significant, F (1, 214) =4.376, p<0.05 (see Table 7). There was no Gender× Sexualization, Candidate× Gender, or three-way interactions (see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 8: Pairwise Comparisons 1 (Physical Attractiveness).

Candidate	(I) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(J) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
A	sexualized	non-sexualized	-3.422*	.916	.000	-5.227	-1.617
	non-sexualized	sexualized	3.422*	.916	.000	1.617	5.227
B	sexualized	non-sexualized	-4.399*	.905	.000	-6.183	-2.614
	non-sexualized	sexualized	4.399*	.905	.000	2.614	6.183

Table 9: Pairwise Comparisons 2 (Physical Attractiveness).

1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(I) Candidate	(J) Candidate	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
sexualized	1	2	.938*	.333	.005	.282	1.594
	2	1	-.938*	.333	.005	-1.594	-.282

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Table 9: (continued).

1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(I) Candidate	(J) Candidate	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
non-sexualized	1	2	-.038	.327	.907	-.684	.607
	2	1	.038	.327	.907	-.607	.684

Table 10: Pairwise Comparisons 3 (Physical Attractiveness).

1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(I) 1=male, 2=female	(J) 1=male, 2=female	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
sexualized	Male	Female	.241	1.255	.848	-2.233	2.715
	Female	Male	-.241	1.255	.848	-2.715	2.233
non-sexualized	Male	Female	3.266*	1.234	.009	.834	5.699
	Female	Male	-3.266*	1.234	.009	-5.699	-.834

Table 11: Pairwise Comparisons 4 (Physical Attractiveness).

1=male, 2=female	(I) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(J) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	sexualized	non-sexualized	-5.423*	1.273	.000	-7.931	-2.915
	non-sexualized	sexualized	5.423*	1.273	.000	2.915	7.931
Female	sexualized	non-sexualized	-2.398*	1.216	.050	-4.795	.000
	non-sexualized	sexualized	2.398*	1.216	.050	.000	4.795

Referring to the pairwise comparison results, for both Candidates A and B, their perceived physical attractiveness for non-sexualized photos was significantly higher than for non-sexualized photos (see Table 8). For sexualized photos, Candidate A's physical attractiveness rating was significantly higher

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than Candidate B's (see Table 9), which might be explained by Candidate A's swimsuit exposing the breast more. Males rated significantly higher on physical attractiveness than females when evaluating non-sexualized photos, but the difference became non-significant when it came to sexualized photos (see Table 10). For males, they gave significantly higher scores on physical attractiveness for non-sexualized photos than for sexualized photos, while females' ratings for sexualized and non-sexualized photos did not differ significantly (see Table 11).

3.3. Task Attractiveness

Table 12: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Task Attractiveness).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	243485.837	1	243485.837	2818.877	.000
Gender	322.013	1	322.013	3.728	.055
Sexualization	2661.751	1	2661.751	30.816	.000
Gender * Sexualization	160.520	1	160.520	1.858	.174
Error	18484.655	214	86.377		

Table 13: Tests of Within-Subjects Effects (Task Attractiveness).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Candidate	1.303	1	1.303	0.242	0.624
Candidate * Gender	3.398	1	3.398	0.63	0.428
Candidate * Sexualization	0.961	1	0.961	0.178	0.673
Candidate * Gender * Sexualization	20.555	1	20.56	3.812	0.052
Error (Candidate)	1154.038	214	5.393		

When evaluating task attractiveness, the main effect of sexualization was statistically significant, $F(1, 214) = 30.816$, $p<0.05$, such that participants' task attractiveness ratings for the candidates' non-sexualized photos ($M=26.05$) were significantly higher than sexualized photos ($M=21.18$) (see Tables 12 and 1). The main effects of both candidate and gender were not significant (see Tables 12 and 13). In addition, there were neither two-way nor three-way interaction effects (see Tables 12 and 13).

Table 14: Pairwise Comparisons 1 (Task Attractiveness).

1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	Candidate	(I) 1=male, 2=female	(J) 1=male, 2=female	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference

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Table 14: (continued).

1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	Candidate	(I) 1=male, 2=female	(J) 1=male, 2=female	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
sexualized	1	Male	Female	.764	1.307	.560	-1.813	3.341
		Female	Male	-.764	1.307	.560	-3.341	1.813
	2	Male	Female	.248	1.313	.850	-2.340	2.836
		Female	Male	-.248	1.313	.850	-2.836	2.340
non-sexualized	1	Male	Female	2.325	1.286	.072	-.210	4.859
		Female	Male	-2.325	1.286	.072	-4.859	.210

Table 15: Pairwise Comparisons 2 (Task Attractiveness).

1=male, 2=female	Candidate	(I) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	(J) 1=sexualized, 2=non-sexualized	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	1	sexualized	non-sexualized	-5.635*	1.326	.000	-8.248	-3.022
		non-sexualized	sexualized	5.635*	1.326	.000	3.022	8.248
	2	sexualized	non-sexualized	-6.692*	1.331	.000	-9.316	-4.068
		non-sexualized	sexualized	6.692*	1.331	.000	4.068	9.316
Female	1	sexualized	non-sexualized	-4.074*	1.267	.002	-6.571	-1.577
		non-sexualized	sexualized	4.074*	1.267	.002	1.577	6.571
	2	sexualized	non-sexualized	-3.392*	1.272	.008	-5.900	-.884
		non-sexualized	sexualized	3.392*	1.272	.008	.884	5.900

Simple effect analysis showed that males' task attractiveness rating for the non-sexualized photo of Candidate B was significantly higher than females (see Table 14). For both males and females, Candidate A and B, the perceived task attractiveness for non-sexualized photos was significantly higher than for sexualized photos (see Table 15).

4. Discussion

Partially supporting previous findings, this study found that sexualization on social media negatively affected female users' social, physical, and task attractiveness [2,5]. For males, they evaluated non-sexualized female users as having significantly higher social, physical, and task attractiveness than non-sexualized users. For both males and females, as expected, they rated significantly higher on task attractiveness for non-sexualized photos than sexualized photos, which might be explained by the stereotype content model.

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However, surprisingly, the effect was non-significant for females' evaluation of female users' social and physical attractiveness, which was inconsistent with Daniels and Zurbriggen's study [5]. As expected, when evaluating non-sexualized photos, males rated significantly higher on social, physical, and task attractiveness than females. Unexpectedly, there were no gender differences when evaluating sexualized photos.

The above results reflect a noteworthy trend: Males clearly tend to perceive non-sexualized users as having higher social, physical, and task attractiveness. For females, however, sexualization only had a significant effect on the ratings of task attractiveness.

Males' preference for non-sexualized photos might be explained by ambivalent sexism theory. As sexy women might be seen as a challenge to males' power by seducing them, males' attractiveness ratings for sexualized females were significantly lower than for non-sexualized females [3]. In addition, according to the evolutionary, men are more prone to experience jealousy in response to sexual infidelity compared to females as there is a heightened risk of parental uncertainty [7]. As sexualized women are evaluated as more likely to engage in casual sex, males might perceive them as less attractive [3].

Unlike males, the difference in females' social and physical attractiveness ratings for sexualized and non-sexualized photos was insignificant, which is a new finding. This phenomenon might be explained by cultivation theory: Individuals may adopt the same worldview and self-concept when they are repeatedly exposed to the same type of images, a process known as assimilation [8]. Past research has shown that repeated exposure to sexualized content may lead girls to view sexualized females as ideal selves [9]. In the experiments of Starr and Ferguson, 60 girls aged 6-9 were shown two dolls, one scantily dressed (sexualized) and the other fashionable but not revealing (non-sexualized), and the results showed that 70% of the girls would pick the sexualized doll as an ideal self [10]. Therefore, on one hand, females might be affected by the ambivalent sexism theory that women should be pure and faithful instead of seductive and revealing [4]. On the other hand, females may perceive sexualized women as ideal selves and more popular, which probably explains the lack of significant differences in social attractiveness and physical attractiveness when females rated sexualized versus non-sexualized photos [11].

However, frequent exposure to sexualized content and viewing sexualizing women as ideal selves may lead to females' self-objectification, which encourages them to evaluate their own values based on their physical attractiveness instead of abilities [1]. Self-objectification takes the form of self-monitoring (body surveillance), which aims to conform to cultural ideals, leading to eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem [10]. Therefore, females' exposure to highly sexualized social media environments is a matter of concern.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined viewers' attractiveness ratings for sexualized versus non-sexualized female profile owners on online dating apps and found that females' sexualized presentations came with certain negative impacts on others' evaluations. Sexualized female profile owners were considered as having less task attractiveness by both males and females, and were rated lower on social and physical attractiveness by males. However, this gender difference indicates that women might internalize a sexualized image as an ideal self, which in turn exacerbates self-objectification, leading to a series of negative consequences.

The limitation of this study was that, although there were two candidates, each candidate only had one photo, which may not be enough for participants to form the most objective evaluation. Future research could increase the number of photos for each candidate and complete their profile information. In addition, there is a lack of empirical research analyzing the results of female

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participants. Future studies could explore the reasons for the less significant differences in females' social attractiveness and physical attractiveness ratings to sexualized and non-sexualized photos.

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