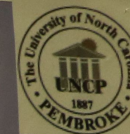


Can Pretty Pictures Be Harmful?: Depression, Body Esteem, and Career Aspirations

Shilpa M.P. Regan, Melanie B. Hoy, & Kelly A. Charlton
The University of North Carolina at Pembroke



Abstract

Objectification of women has been linked to depression, poor body esteem, and limited work aspirations. Results indicated that nonsexualized attractive images of women influenced future career aspirations.



Introduction

Today's media is saturated with sexualized images of women. Women in revealing clothing and suggestive poses are used to sell items as diverse as perfume to cars. This issue has been widely studied, with sexualized content having been found in advertisements, television shows, movies, music videos, video games, and even children's toys. Objectification of women in such a manner has been related to lowered self esteem and body esteem (Groesz et al., 2002; Turner et al., 1997), higher levels of depression (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Mills et al., 2002; Rivadeneyra et al., 2007), and even decreased cognitive resources (Frederickson et al., 1998). This media portrayal of women also severely limits women's conceptualizations of themselves as anything more than a sexualized being. We propose that these media representations may act to limit women's aspirations for themselves and also may act to limit the expectations of women's opportunity in men as well.

Method

Participants

Participants were 125 (men = 40% and women = 60%) undergraduates ranging in age from 18 to 54 years ($M = 19.74$, $SD = 4.22$). The majority (92%) of participants endorsed a Christian faith and the ethnic classification was as follows: African American/Black (41.6%), European American (31.2%), Native American (15.2%), Hispanic/Latino (4.0%), and Biracial (7.2%). The average GPA was 2.97 ($SD = .47$).

Measures and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to view advertisements that were sexualized, nonsexualized, or neutral in content. They then completed questionnaires that asked about perceptions of women's achievements, aspirations for their own lives (Future work selves; Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2012), body esteem (Mendelson & White, 1982), and depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Participants also completed a demographic measure which included Likert scale questions on media usage (0 = never, 7 = frequently).

Results

Media Exposure

Scores on media exposure ranged from 0-7. Participants media exposure was as follows: internet ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.26$), television ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.56$), music videos ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.93$), and magazines ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.96$).

Career Aspirations

Whether or not participants viewed sexualized advertisements did influence the salience of future work self, $F(2, 119) = 3.138$, $p < .05$. Participants in the non-sexualized condition scored higher ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .69$) than those in the sexualized ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .75$) and neutral conditions ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .72$).

Career identity commitment was also influenced by participant sex, $F(1, 119) = 4.69$, $p < .05$. Females scored higher ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .65$) than males ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .62$).

Depression

Participants scores on the CES-D ranged from 20-62 ($M = 41.89$, $SD = 6.80$), indicating a moderately depressed sample. No significant differences were found for gender or sexualization group.

Body Esteem

Scores on the BES can range from 1-5. Participants had medium to high body esteem ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .70$). No significant differences were found by gender or sexualized condition. An effect for ethnic differences approached significance.

Discussion

Results suggest that viewing non-sexualized images of attractive women influenced both men and women in their career aspirations. Participants in the non-sexualized image condition viewed their future professional identity as more central to themselves than those in the sexualized or neutral conditions. This result was expected for females, as it reflects that the sexualized images may restrict women's thoughts about other possible identities than a sexual one. For men, however, these results were surprising. It may be that viewing attractive women who are not easily sexually available primes males to follow an evolutionarily ingrained path to seek to provide for a female, and thus think more about their work selves.

The lack of significant results for the body esteem and depression measures was surprising and contrary to previous research. Much previous work, however, has focused largely on Caucasian individuals. Future research will explore whether these results were affected by the diverse ethnicity in our sample.

For further information

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Results

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Scores on media exposure ranged from 0-7. Participants media exposure was as follows: internet ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.26$), television ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.56$), music videos ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.93$), and magazines ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.96$).

Career Aspirations

Whether or not participants viewed sexualized advertisements did influence the salience of future work self, $F(2, 119) = 3.138$, $p < .05$. Participants in the non-sexualized condition scored higher ($M = 4.50$, $SD = .69$) than those in the sexualized ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .75$) and neutral conditions ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .72$).

Career identity commitment was also influenced by participant sex, $F(1, 119) = 4.69$, $p < .05$. Females scored higher ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .85$) than males ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .52$).

Depression

Participants scores on the CES-D ranged from 20-42 ($M = 41.89$, $SD = 6.80$), indicating a moderately depressed sample. No significant differences were found for gender or sexualization group.

Body Esteem

Scores on the BES can range from 1-6. Participants had medium to high body esteem ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .70$). No significant differences were found by gender or sexualized condition. An effect for ethnic differences approached significance.

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Results suggest that viewing non-sexualized images of attractive women influenced both men and women in their career aspirations. Participants in the non-sexualized image condition viewed their future professional identity as more central to themselves than those in the sexualized or neutral conditions. This result was expected for females, as it reflects that the sexualized images may restrict women's thoughts about other possible identities than a sexual one. For men, however, these results were surprising. It may be that viewing attractive women who are not easily sexually available primes men to follow an exclusively ingrained path to seek to provide for a female, and thus think more about their work selves.

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