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Abstract

Our work adopted an intersectional approach to investigate how women’s racial identity may influence how they evaluate and are impacted by body-positive imagery of women on social media. In a 2 x 2 x 2 experiment (N = 975), we examined how source race (Black vs. White) and sexualization (non-sexualized vs. sexualized) in body-positive images affects Black and White viewers’ impressions of self-interest, moral appropriateness, and body positivity. Results indicated that viewers generally responded more favorably to non-sexualized (vs. sexualized) images: Participants reported less self-interested motivations for sharing, found the images more morally appropriate, and believed they were more effective representations of body positivity. Results also revealed that Black (vs. White) viewers tended to express more appreciation for body-positive imagery, regardless of source race or sexualization. Findings not only advance our theoretical understanding of sexual objectification with more diverse depictions and broader sampling, but also provide practical suggestions for advocates of the body-positive movement.

Keywords: sexualization; objectification; body image; body positive; race; intersectionality; social media; Instagram
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Media depictions of thin, sexualized women can be harmful to other women and girls (Grabe et al., 2008; Karsay et al., 2018). As a result, researchers have begun to examine how diverse depictions of women may dampen these negative effects and promote greater acceptance of marginalized bodies that deviate from traditional conceptualizations of beauty and attractiveness—commonly referred to as body-positive content (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2022; Clayton et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2021; Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Hendrickse et al., 2021; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Body-positive messages on social media can affect women’s body image, producing generally favorable effects on psychological and social well-being (Cohen, Fardouly, et al., 2019; Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). Nonetheless, the body-positive movement has received scrutiny for still directing attention toward appearance and oftentimes depicting women in a sexually objectifying manner (Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020). Recent findings indicate that although sexualized body-positive content is not viewed unfavorably, it produces less pronounced positive effects than non-sexualized body-positive content (Vendemia et al., 2021). Our first aim is to further examine how viewers evaluate sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) body-positive images on social media. In particular, we explore whether the sexualization of body-positive images violates viewer expectations and influences the perceived motives, favorability, and effectiveness of posts.

Our second aim is to examine how viewers’ racial and gender identity interact to influence evaluations of body-positive content on social media (Biefeld et al., 2021). Although scholarship suggests women are often depicted in sexualized ways (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), research indicates that Black women are more frequently portrayed in a hypersexualized
manner compared to White women (Jean et al., 2022) and thus may endorse a different set of appearance ideals rooted in racial and gender stereotypes (West, 1995). Accordingly, we adopt an intersectional approach to examine how Black and White women may respond differently to body-positive content produced by Black and White women due to divergent cultural influences (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016a; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016b). Specifically, we explore how perceptions of beauty standards vary between Black and White viewers and how these differences may influence evaluations of sexualized and non-sexualized body-positive images shared by Black and White women on social media.

Literature Review

Sexualization and Sexualized Gender Stereotypes

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) offers a framework to understand how first-hand sexually objectifying experiences and witnessing the sexual objectification of others can negatively impact women and girls. Sexual objectification is linked to self-objectification (i.e., adopting an outsider view of oneself), negative psychological consequences (e.g., body shame, appearance anxiety), and serious mental health risks (e.g., depression, disordered eating). Sexualized depictions of women are commonplace in the mainstream media (American Psychological Association, 2007; Ward, 2016) and popular social media platforms (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Despite its prevalence, research on the effects of sexualized media content tends to focus on women who fit “the thin ideal” (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015) perhaps due to the lack of media representations of larger bodies. Thus, it may be a more extreme violation of conventional Western beauty ideals for a woman to appear not only with a larger body size, but also in a sexually objectifying manner. As such, we hypothesize:
H1: Sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) body-positive images of women violate expectations of how women traditionally appear in the mainstream media to a greater extent.

Women who present themselves in a sexualized manner are at risk of objectification (i.e., being evaluated as an object) and dehumanization (i.e., being considered less fully human) by others. Several content analyses reveal that advocates of the body-positive movement on social media frequently present themselves in a sexually objectifying manner (e.g., revealing clothing, skin exposure, sexually suggestive poses; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020). A series of recent experiments suggest sexualization in body-positive images can undermine body-positive aims (Biefeld et al., 2021; Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2022; Vendemia et al., 2021). For example, Vendemia and colleagues (2021) found that exposure to sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) body-positive images of women on social media heightened viewers’ self-sexualization and endorsement of traditional beauty ideals (e.g., thinness), as well as led viewers to sexually objectify the women in the images and believe their images were shared out of self-interest (e.g., bragging; selling something; attracting a mate). Another study found that sexualization in body-positive social media images led viewers to rate posts as less body-positive and less morally appropriate (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2022). Consistent with sexualized gender stereotypes, Biefeld and colleagues (2021) found that viewers rated women who appeared sexualized in images as less nice and intelligent. Objectification theory details how sexualized depictions of women—even body-positive ones—might negatively affect how women are evaluated by others. As reviewed by Biefeld and Brown (2022), a byproduct of sexual objectification is that women are stripped of their personhood and agency. Morality is a key component of humanness and sexualized women are viewed as less trustworthy, sincere, and honest (Biefeld & Brown, 2022; Biefeld et al., 2021; Halliwell et al., 2011; Loughnan et al.,
2010; Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011). As women promote body-positive aims on social media, we anticipate the lack of humanness and morality that ensues from sexualized depictions to manifest in the following ways:

H2: Participants exposed to sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) body-positive images of women will report (a) more self-interested reasons for sharing the images, (b) lower perceptions of moral appropriateness, and (c) less favorable reactions toward the images.

Following the same logic, we also sought to evaluate whether sexualized depictions are considered authentic representations of body positivity (i.e., challenging dominant sociocultural appearance ideals and expanding representation of traditionally marginalized bodies). If sexualization leads viewers to evaluate body-positive women as less sincere, trustworthy, and honest, it stands to reason that the perceived authenticity of their posts will be diminished.

H3: Non-sexualized (vs. sexualized) body-positive images of women will be deemed as more authentically promoting body positivity.

Beyond judgments of others, it is important to consider how viewers’ own self-concepts may be affected by exposure to sexualized body-positive imagery. The tripartite influence model of body image suggests media exposure is one way in which women (a) engage in social comparison processes and (b) internalize beauty ideals (Thompson et al., 1999). Traditionally, thin women are featured in the mainstream media as source for these self-evaluations; however, less is known about the extent to which individuals compare themselves and endorse beauty ideals with respect to body-positive women, especially those who emulate mainstream media themes of sexual objectification. Consistent with sexualized body-positive women potentially garnering less favorable evaluations, viewers might engage in downward social comparisons and consider themselves better off than the women in the images. It is also possible that exposure to
sexualized women might trigger viewers’ thoughts about their own appearance and how it measures up to broader set of ideals, resulting in greater endorsement of traditional beauty ideals. Thus, we propose:

H4: Participants will consider themselves better off than body-positive women who appear sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) in the images.

H5: Participants exposed to images of sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) body-positive women will report heightened importance of beauty.

Although research documents the effects of sexualization on women, limited studies have addressed how individual differences may shape their evaluations of body-positive imagery. More work is needed to consider how sexualized stereotypes translate to a broader range of women and associated stereotypes, specifically related to racial identity (Lowy et al., 2021).

Racial Identity and Evaluations of Body-Positive Imagery

Intersectionality is a framework used to understand multiple aspects of individuals’ social categorization and group identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016a). Examples include gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, culture, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance (e.g., weight, size). These overlaps or intersecting social locations may result in oppression and discrimination, as well as power and privilege, in society. Although body image research offers insight into how sexualization may dampen the efficacy of body-positive imagery, more research is needed to understand how important aspects of others’ and one’s own gender and racial identity may intersect to influence evaluations of such content.

In particular, women may respond differently to body-positive content produced by Black and White women due to divergent cultural influences. It has been long established that the mainstream media routinely features thin, attractive, White women with numerous studies
documenting negative effects of exposure (Grabe et al., 2008). Black women have historically
differed in their degree and nature of media representation (Anderson et al., 2018; Evans &
McConnell, 2003; Fujioka et al., 2009; Jefferson & Stake, 2009). Content analyses show that
magazines targeted towards Black women are less likely to use thin-ideal models (Shoneye et al.,
2013), and feature larger or curvier women, indicating a departure in Black beauty ideals from
mainstream beauty ideals (Dawson-Andoh et al., 2011). Therefore, Black women may not be
associated or evaluated with the same set of beauty ideals as White women. For instance,
research indicates that larger Black women are evaluated as more friendly and successful than
larger White women (Wade & DiMaria, 2003). Similarly, a content analysis found that Black
characters on prime time TV were heavier than other racial groups and seen as more likable
(Mastro & Figueroa-Caballero, 2018). As the body-positive movement seeks to deconstruct
mainstream beauty ideals (typically associated with White women) and promote greater
acceptance of marginalized bodies, Black women may garner more favorable evaluations than
White women perpetuating the movement. We hypothesize:

H6: Participants exposed to images of Black (vs. White) body-positive women will report
(a) less self-interested reasons for sharing the images, (b) higher perceptions of moral
appropriateness, and (c) more favorable reactions toward the images.

However, it is possible that women might react to body-positive imagery in a globally
positive manner, regardless of the source’s race. Instead, viewer’s own racial identity may
influence acceptance of body-positive imagery. A variety of scholarship indicates that Black and
White women differ in their appearance ideals (e.g., Duke, 2000; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012;
Jefferson & Stake, 2009) and these differences may shape impressions of body-positive imagery.
In the Black community, there is a greater acceptance of a broader range of body sizes and
attributes unrelated to appearance that are valued as indicators of beauty (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Hunter et al., 2021; Overstreet et al., 2010; Parker et al., 1995; Rubin et al., 2003; Webb et al., 2013). Interview work revealed that Black girls valued personality traits over physical appearance in their conceptualization of the “ideal African American girl” and tended to idealize physical traits closer to their own (e.g., bigger buttocks, darker skin tone; Parker et al., 1995). Webb and colleagues (2013) found that college-aged Black women resisted the idea of a singular body ideal, and instead endorsed conceptualizing a personalized body ideal.

Research also suggests that Black women do not compare themselves to traditional media figures (e.g., the thin ideal) because they do not consider these figures representative of their body ideals (DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010; Evans & McConnell, 2003). Overstreet and colleagues (2010) indicate that Black women may prefer a curvier body ideal due to the cultural endorsement of shapeliness within Black media. Together, these works show that, relative to White women and girls, Black women and girls are more resistant towards or less affected by mainstream body ideals. Black women’s disengagement with prominent sociocultural beauty standards is also likely due to their historic dehumanization and othering. Black people have faced disenfranchisement dating back to the slave trade with Whiteness considered the standard or model (Patton, 2006). Hall and Crutchfield (2018) suggest that in the United States, White femininity is associated with beauty and social status, whereas Black women are reduced to stereotypes. This othering is evident in traditionally less charitable depictions of Black women and racial stereotypes of their bodies (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). This, in turn, may make Black women more accepting of body-positive content and appreciative of the movement’s aims. Given that (a) White women tend to embrace the thin-ideal to a greater extent and (b) Black
women tend to have a broader conceptualization of beauty, we expected that Black women
would respond to body-positive content more favorably than their White counterparts:

H7: Black (vs. White) viewers will react more favorably to body-positive imagery
reporting (a) less self-interested reasons for sharing the images, (b) higher perceptions of
moral appropriateness, and (c) more favorable reactions toward the images.

Although research suggests that the race of women in body-positive images and racial
identity of viewers may shape evaluations of body-positive content, an intersectional framework
emphasizes how multiple aspects of one’s identity influence individuals’ lived experiences and
impressions. Thus, it is important to understand how one’s own racial identity may shape
evaluations of their ingroup (i.e., same racial group) or outgroup (i.e., another racial group) and
perhaps interact with the ways in which that group is depicted (i.e., sexualization). Thus, we seek
to empirically test the interactions among viewer race (Black vs. White), target race (Black vs.
White), and target sexualization (non-sexualized vs. sexualized) on evaluations of body-positive
imagery by asking:

RQ1: Do viewer race (Black vs. White), source race (Black vs. White), and source
sexualization (non-sexualized vs. sexualized) interact to impact evaluations (self-
interested reasons, moral appropriateness, favorability) of body-positive imagery and
perceptions that the women in images authentically promote body positivity?

A conceptual model of our hypotheses is included in a supplemental file.

Method

A 2 x 2 x 2 mixed experimental design was used to examine our hypotheses and research
question. Images of body-positive women varied in their sexualization (non-sexualized vs.
sexualized) and race (White vs. Black) between subjects. Participants’ race (Black vs. White) was measured as another factor.

**Procedure**

Procedures were approved by a university Institutional Review Board. Participants were told that they would view 10 photos of body-positive women taken from Instagram. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: (a) non-sexualized + White women; (b) non-sexualized + Black women; (c) sexualized + White women; or (d) sexualized + Black women. Each image was displayed individually. To ensure participants spent time carefully viewing each image, they were asked to contribute three hashtags per image before advancing to the next image (Vendemia et al., 2021). Participants were exposed to images for approximately 9 minutes on average ($M = 8.87, SD = 8.55$). After viewing the photos, participants completed our questionnaire and then Dynata provided them compensation.

**Sample**

We sought to recruit a sample of at least 800 adult U.S. women through Dynata. A priori power analyses conducted with G*Power indicated that at least 787 participants were needed to achieve sufficient statistical power (power = .80) for detecting small effects ($f = .10$). For inclusion in our analyses, participants needed to (a) identify as an adult woman (at least 18 years of age), (b) pass a simple attention check, and (c) correctly identify the race of the women in the stimulus images. Our final sample consisted of 975 participants: 499 (51.2%) identified as Black/African American and 476 (48.8%) identified as White/Caucasian. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 91 ($M = 51.94, SD = 19.76$).

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1 The sample skewed older relative to global and U.S. adult Instagram users (Pew Research Center, 2021; Statista Research Department, 2022). Post-hoc moderation analyses were conducted via PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) with age as a moderator of hypothesized effects. Results are reported in a supplemental file.
Stimulus Materials

A mock Instagram page was created to display stimulus images due to the prevalence of body-positive imagery found on Instagram, as identified by content analyses (Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Lazuka et al., 2020), and recent experiments on body positivity hosted on the platform (e.g., Cohen, Fardouly, et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2020; Hendrickse et al., 2021; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Stimulus images were sourced from publicly-available Instagram accounts that included body-positive hashtags on images (#bopo, #bodypositivity). Images featured a full body shot of a woman who appeared 20 to 30 years of age and displayed a larger than average body size (e.g., plus-size clothing, visible body fat, body rolls), consistent with content analyses and experimental research (Cohen, Fardouly, et al., 2019; Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020). Each experimental condition included 10 images of women varying in their degree of sexualization and race.

Sexualization was operationalized through the appearance of the women in the images. Consistent with past research on sexual objectification (Bell et al., 2018), sexualized women appeared in minimal clothing allowing for maximum body and skin exposure (e.g., bikinis, lingerie). Non-sexualized women appeared fully clothed (e.g., full-length dresses, jeans, sweaters). Notably, the same women were used for both the sexualized and non-sexualized images to eliminate possible confounds. The race of the women in the images also varied: Half of images were of White women; the other half were of Black women. Race was determined based on their visible skin tone and was further confirmed by participants’ successful identification of the women’s race.

Measures

All measures are on 7-point scales unless specified otherwise.
Manipulation Check

**Perceived Sexualization.** The degree to which participants felt the women in the images were sexualized was assessed with three semantic differential items (Vendemia et al., 2021): Not very sexual/Very sexual; Not revealing/Very revealing; and Fully clothed/Minimally clothed ($\alpha = .79$).

**Source and Image Evaluations**

**Expectedness.** The extent to which participants felt women in the images violated their expectations for how women traditionally appear in the mainstream media was measured with items adapted from Afifi and Metts’ (1998) violation expectedness subscale. A prompt stated “In traditional media outlets (e.g., magazines, television, movies), seeing women appear like the way they did in the photos is…” with sample endpoints: Not typical/Very typical; Uncommon/Very Common; and Infrequent/Very frequent ($\alpha = .94$).

**Self-Interested Motives.** The extent to which participants believed the women shared their images on social media for self-serving reasons was assessed with five items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; Vendemia & DeAndrea, 2018). A prompt stated “The people in the photos that you viewed shared these images on Instagram…” with the following reasons: to gain “likes”/shares/endorsement; to show off; to brag; to attract a mate or romantic partner(s); and to sell something ($\alpha = .84$).

**Moral Appropriateness.** Moral appropriateness was assessed with five items from Boerman et al. (2018). A stem stated “I think that showing content in this manner on Instagram is…” with the following endpoints: Inappropriate/Appropriate; Unacceptable/Acceptable; Wrong/Right; In bad taste/In good taste; and Immoral/Moral ($\alpha = .98$).
Valence. The valence of participants’ reactions toward images was assessed with items adapted from Afifi and Metts’ (1998) violation valence subscale. The stem stated “Viewing the images was…” with endpoints: A negative experience/A positive experience; Unpleasant/Pleasant; and Unenjoyable/Enjoyable ($\alpha = .98$).

Body Positivity. The extent to which viewers felt women in the images were authentic proponents of the body-positive movement was captured with 10 items ($1 =$ strongly disagree; $7 = $ strongly agree) created for purposes of this study. Items were subjected to factor analysis that revealed a single-factor structure explaining 60.96% of the variance and factor loadings ranging from .65 to .84. A prompt stated “The people in the photos that you viewed shared these images on Instagram…” with the following reasons: to display underrepresented groups; to push representation boundaries; to promote diversity; to encourage more inclusive depictions of women; to inspire others; to show a variety of body types; to display diverse bodies; to challenge traditional beauty norms; to challenge societal standards of attractiveness; and to encourage others to appreciate their own bodies ($\alpha = .93$).

Physical Attractiveness. The degree to which participants felt the women in the images were physically attractive was assessed with three semantic differential items: Unattractive/Attractive; Ugly/Pretty; and Bad looking/Good looking ($\alpha = .96$).

Body Size. Participants indicated the body size of the women in the photos with three semantic differential items: Underweight/Obese; Thin/Heavy; and Petite/Plus-Size ($\alpha = .81$).

Self-Evaluations

Self-Discrepancy. Inspired by Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) state self-esteem scale, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the women in the photos seemed satisfied with their lives on five items (happy, successful, life satisfaction, self-
confidence, self-esteem) ranging from 0 (0% = not at all) to 100 (100% = completely; α = .93). They were also asked to rate themselves on the exact same items (α = .94). Scores were averaged for both scales and then a difference score (Self – Women = Self-Discrepancy) was created to determine if participants felt better (positive values) or worse (negative values) about themselves relative to the women in the images.

**Importance of Beauty.** Importance of beauty was assessed with four items (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; Forbes et al., 2007). A sample item is: “The most important asset a woman can have is her looks” (α = .75).

**Results**

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to test our hypotheses and research question. Our results are organized by main and interaction effects. Table 1 presents correlations; Table 2 provides a summary of results.

**Source Sexualization**

A one-way ANOVA was used to ensure the success of our experimental manipulation of sexualization. As expected, participants who viewed sexualized images of women (M = 5.63, SD = 1.16) felt the images were significantly more sexually objectifying than those who viewed the non-sexualized images (M = 2.56, SD = 1.31), F(1, 973) = 1486.64, p < .001, η² = .60. Our experimental induction was successful.

**Source and Image Evaluations**

H1 predicted that sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) images of body-positive women would violate expectations of how women traditionally appear in the mainstream media to a greater extent. Consistent with H1, sexualized images (M = 3.36, SD = 1.92) were considered less
normative depictions than non-sexualized images ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.79$), $F(1, 973) = 15.12, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

In general, participants ascribed less favorable characteristics to sexualized body-positive women relative to non-sexualized women. H2 anticipated that participants exposed to sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) images of body-positive women would report (a) more self-interested reasons for sharing the images, (b) lower perceptions of moral appropriateness, and (c) less favorable reactions toward the images. In line with H2, participants felt sexualized images ($M = 4.49, SD = 1.38$) were shared for more self-interested reasons than non-sexualized images ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 973) = 22.75, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Participants also considered images of sexualized women ($M = 4.39, SD = 2.06$) less morally appropriate than non-sexualized images ($M = 5.92, SD = 1.43$), $F(1, 973) = 184.88, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$. And, participants rated the images of sexualized women ($M = 4.38, SD = 2.15$) less favorably than non-sexualized women ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.65$), $F(1, 973) = 119.61, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Thus, H2 was supported.

H3 posited non-sexualized (vs. sexualized) body-positive images of women would be deemed more effective at promoting body positivity. Supporting H3, participants found non-sexualized images ($M = 5.46, SD = 1.08$) significantly more body-positive than sexualized images ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.29$), $F(1, 973) = 6.27, p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

**Self-Evaluations**

H4 predicted that participants would consider themselves better off than body-positive women who appeared sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) in the images. Participants compared themselves to the sexualized women ($M = 0.65, SD = 29.67$) and non-sexualized women differently ($M = -6.41, SD = 28.79$), $F(1, 973) = 14.20, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .01$. One-samples t-tests were used to further inspect if participants considered themselves statistically different than the
women they viewed, using 0 as the test value. Those who viewed sexualized women did not believe the women were significantly better off than themselves, \(t(476) = 0.48, p = .63\).

However, participants who viewed non-sexualized women believed the women were better off than themselves, \(t(498) = -4.97, p < .001, d = -0.22\). Thus, H4 was partially supported.

H5 anticipated that participants exposed to images of sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) body-positive women would report heightened importance of beauty. Participants did not significantly differ in their importance placed on beauty whether they viewed sexualized images \((M = 3.16, SD = 1.40)\) or non-sexualized images \((M = 3.08, SD = 1.31)\), \(F(1, 973) = 1.04, p = .31\).

Source Race

H6 predicted that participants would rate images of Black (vs. White) body-positive women more favorably, reporting (a) less self-interested reasons for sharing the images, (b) higher perceptions of moral appropriateness, and (c) more favorable reactions toward the images.

In contrast to our prediction, participants felt Black women \((M = 4.41, SD = 1.30)\) shared their images for more self-interested reasons than White women \((M = 4.16, SD = 1.32)\), \(F(1, 973) = 8.84, p = .003, \eta^2 = .01\). However, participants’ perceptions of moral appropriateness did not significantly differ between Black \((M = 5.07, SD = 1.97)\) and White \((M = 5.29, SD = 1.87)\) women in the images, \(F(1, 973) = 3.16, p = .08\). Participants’ reactions toward the images also did not significantly differ between Black \((M = 5.06, SD = 2.01)\) and White \((M = 5.06, SD = 2.05)\) women, \(F(1, 973) = 0.002, p = .97\), trending favorably for both sets of images. H6 was not supported.

Viewer Race
H7 predicted that Black (vs. White) viewers would react more favorably to body-positive imagery reporting (a) less self-interested reasons for sharing the images, (b) higher perceptions of moral appropriateness, and (c) more favorable reactions toward the images.

**Source and Image Evaluations**

Regardless of source race or sexualization (i.e., no significant interaction effects), Black participants tended to judge body-positive images slightly more favorably relative to White participants. Black participants ($M = 5.54, SD = 1.75$) considered the images more morally appropriate than White participants ($M = 4.79, SD = 2.02$), $F(1, 973) = 38.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$. Black participants ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.82$) also expressed more positive reactions toward the images than White participants ($M = 4.55, SD = 2.11$), $F(1, 973) = 62.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$. However, Black participants ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.39$) and White participants ($M = 4.35, SD = 1.24$) did not vary in their perceptions that the images were shared for self-serving reasons, $F(1, 973) = 2.48, p = .12$. Thus, H7 was partially supported.

**Self-Evaluations**

In addition, we investigated how Black and White viewers may be personally affected differently by body-positive images. Black participants felt they were slightly worse off than the women in the images ($M = -7.31, SD = 26.83$) compared to White participants ($M = 1.62, SD = 31.30$), $F(1, 973) = 22.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$. Black participants ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.46$) also reported heightened importance of beauty compared to White participants ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.23$) post exposure, $F(1, 973) = 7.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$.

**Interaction Effects**

To address RQ1, post-hoc tests were used to explore potential interactions across experimental groups on our outcomes. All three-way and most two-way interactions were not
statistically significant. Of the few tests that were statistically significant, the effect sizes were marginal ($\eta^2 < .01$). A complete summary of mean differences by experimental group and several post-hoc analyses are located in a supplemental file.

**Discussion**

Although all body-positive images tended to be judged favorably by Black and White viewers, results indicate that non-sexualized (vs. sexualized) body-positive images were rated most favorably: Participants exposed to non-sexualized body-positive images reported less self-interested motivations for sharing, found the images more morally appropriate, and believed they were more authentic representations of body positivity. Results also revealed that Black (vs. White) viewers tended to express more appreciation for body-positive imagery, regardless of source race and sexualization. These findings advance our theoretical understanding of sexual objectification with more diverse depictions of the body and broader sampling, as well as provide practical suggestions for advocates of the body-positive movement.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

A central aim of our work was to further examine the effects of sexualized body-positive content by exploring whether the sexualization of body-positive images violates viewer expectations and influences the favorability and authenticity of the body-positive movement on social media. To this end, our study documents that sexualized body-positive women are considered less normative depictions and yields further support for the dampening effects of sexualization among women with larger bodies. Consistent with recent work (Vendemia et al., 2021), sexualized images resulted in weaker positive effects relative to non-sexualized images, suggesting sexualization could potentially undermine the intents of the body-positive movement and reinforce stigma toward larger bodies (Weeden & Sabini, 2005). It is also important to
recognize the broader negative effects of sexualization for women of all body sizes (Biefeld et al., 2021). Although exposure to sexualized women did not affect participants’ internalization of beauty ideals, our work revealed that participants felt non-sexualized body-positive women were better off than themselves which may inspire others. From a practical standpoint, body-positive advocates may reap further benefits from presenting themselves in a less sexually objectifying manner.

Another important contribution of this work to the objectification literature is that we adopted an intersectional approach to understand how important aspects of others’ and one’s own gender and racial identity may intersect to influence evaluations of body-positive imagery. With increased mainstream recognition of the body-positive movement (Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019), along with the knowledge that the movement highlights historically underrepresented groups, Black women may be more appreciative and attentive to this content. Our research found that although both Black and White women tended to perceive body-positive images in a favorable manner, Black participants had significantly more positive reactions to body-positive content relative to White participants. Previous research has established that Black women tend to have a larger body ideal (Grabe & Hyde, 2006) and do not vest as much authority or relevancy in traditional beauty standards (e.g., the thin ideal) compared to White women (DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010). With this in mind, differences between Black and White participants’ general favorability and acceptance towards body-positive imagery may stem from differences in how they conceptualize beauty. As White women tend to hold the thin ideal to a greater degree than Black women, perhaps White participants viewed body-positive images slightly less favorably than Black participants as the body-positive imagery deviated more from their widely-held standard. In addition, as Black women tend to have a much broader and less appearance-centric
view of their ideal self (Overstreet et al., 2010), perhaps they were more appreciative of images that (a) do not fit mainstream body standards and, (b) increase the representation of marginalized individuals.

Interestingly, Black participants tended to endorse the importance of beauty and appearance to a greater extent than their White peers. This finding speaks to concerns that the body-positive movement reinforces a value system where self-worth is determined by appearance. Content analyses demonstrate that body-positive photos found on Instagram heavily focus on appearance-centric themes (Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020). In a similar vein, critical cultural work has contextualized some forms of body positivity as reinforcing traditional or patriarchal beliefs, connecting a woman’s worth to her appearance (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Darwin & Miller, 2021). Moreover, empirical work has even shown that women who were briefly exposed to body-positive or thin-idealized images exhibited greater state self-objectification relative to those who viewed appearance-neutral images (Cohen, Fardouly, et al., 2019). Thus, although viewing body-positive images has its benefits in increasing representation of traditionally marginalized groups and body appreciation, the movement’s emphasis on broadening conceptualizations of beauty may reinforce that appearance should be highly valued. In the case of Black participants in this study, viewing images of attractive, plus-sized women possibly presented a new, more relevant appearance ideal and reinforced the importance of attractiveness.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the practical and theoretical merit of our findings, this study is not without limitations. Although we adopted an intersectional approach to our work, we only examined the intersection of gender and racial identity with Black and White women. Future studies should
expand the locations of identity examined, especially as theory and empirical evidence suggest different locations of gender and race (e.g., Asian women; Brady et al., 2017) or intersections (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) might influence how individuals respond to body-positive content shared on social media. It is also important to recognize that our sample skewed slightly older relative to global and U.S. adult Instagram users (Pew Research Center, 2021; Statista Research Department, 2022). Future work should consider how viewers’ age and cohort may influence how they react to social media imagery (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022) as another possible intersection of identity.

Another limitation of our work is that we examined responses to a short, one-time exposure of body-positive images on Instagram. Many social media users are repeatedly exposed to body-positive imagery. Future longitudinal work that can capture effects over time—accounting for repeated exposure—would greatly enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of body-positive content on social media. That we found small and moderate effects based on a very limited exposure to body-positive content suggests researchers should attempt to evaluate the impact of what for many is a more ecologically valid amount and duration of body-positive content consumption. Finally, although we used Instagram as the host social media platform due to the prevalence of body-positive content (Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Lazuka et al., 2020), future studies should consider specific platform norms and affordances that may influence the efficacy of body-positive content online.

Conclusion

In summary, our work builds upon body image research by considering the role of racial identity with more diverse depictions of women. In recent years, the body positive movement has gained traction on social media platforms, promoting greater diversity and representation of
appearances less featured in the mainstream. We find that body-positive images are well-received by viewers; however, evaluations can vary depending on features of body-positive content (i.e., sexualization) and viewer characteristics (i.e., racial identity). This study serves as a framework to guide future work on representation and effects via newer media platforms.
**References**


**INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO BODY-POSITIVE IMAGERY**


INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO BODY-POSITIVE IMAGERY


### Table 1

**Correlations and Descriptive Statistics**

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<td>-.37**</td>
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<td>.39**</td>
<td>.10**</td>
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<td>-.10**</td>
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<td>.53**</td>
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*Note.* *p* < .05. **p* < .01 (two-tailed). All measures are on 7-point scales, except for Self-Discrepancy ranging from -100 to 100.
Table 2

ANOVA Results by Source Sexualization and Viewer Race

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<td></td>
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<td>Sexualized Women</td>
<td>(n = 477)</td>
<td>Viewers White</td>
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*Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.*