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**Objects don't just walk away: Exploring the connection between women's engagement in self-objectification and their ability to recognize and respond to sexual violence**

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**Abstract**

Self-objectification affects women's sexual wellbeing, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence. However, there is a lack of research exploring the explanatory mechanism that connects self-objectification level with sexual victimization. This study sampled 65 women in romantic relationships to replicate and extend previous studies revealing the detrimental effect of self-objectification on sexual coercion victimization (Hypothesis 1) and to test the explanatory role of body shame and risk perception in the adverse effect of body surveillance on women's recognition and response to a sexually coercive situation (Hypothesis 2). Results confirmed that women who had previously experienced sexual coercion engage in more body surveillance; moreover, the model confirmed the indirect effect of body surveillance on sexual coercion victimization through less awareness of feelings and perception of risk. Discussion centers on the importance of embodiment programs focusing on increasing young women's awareness of their own feelings in specific sexual encounters.

Keywords: sexual coercion, sexual violence, victimization, objectification, risk perception

## **Objects don't just walk away: Exploring the connection between women's engagement in self-objectification and their ability to recognize and respond to sexual violence**

Sexual intercourse plays an important role in the context of romantic relationships (Muise, 2017). Within healthy relationships, sexual intercourse is a positive and enjoyable interaction between two partners, yet sometimes intercourse occurs despite whether it is wanted by both partners (Brousseau, et al., 2012). When an individual tells lies, makes false promises, threatens to end the relationship, or shows immense displeasure or anger (Koss et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2017) in attempts to force their partner into having sex, this is a demonstration of sexual coercion. Acts of sexual coercion are subtle, yet common instances of sexual and gender-based violence. For instance, a national survey of sexual violence showed that 16% of American women reported having suffered sexual coercion at some point in their lifetime, and in three out of four cases, their current or former partner **was the perpetrator** (Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, research examining the prevalence of sexual victimization across 10 European countries found that 32.2% of women had suffered some form of sexual coercion at some time in their life (Krahé et al., 2015), and in Spain specifically, prevalence rates of sexual coercion victimization ranged between 19.1% and 30.8% (Krahé et al., 2015; Santos-Iglesias & Sierra, 2012). These high rates of victimization are especially troublesome given the consequences of these experiences; women who report having experienced sexual coercion are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress, self-blame, depression, avoidance, low self-esteem, or social anxiety, among others (Brown et al., 2009; Livingston et al., 2004). While perpetrators are the only cause of sexual coercion, understanding how women perceive and react within potentially coercive sexual encounters may assist in the development of interventions aimed at helping women leave relationships in which sexual coercion is occurring. The current work explores how women perceive and

respond to an instance of intimate partner sexual violence based on **their previous experiences of sexual coercion and** their levels of self-objectification.

### **Self-Objectification and Sexual Violence**

According to Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women live within a culture in which a focus on their body, appearance, and sexuality is omnipresent. When women are reduced to their appearance or sexualized body parts for the pleasure of (oftentimes) a male viewer, this is a demonstration of sexual objectification. While objectification within interpersonal interactions is sometimes extreme (e.g., rape), even more subtle and common objectifying behaviors (e.g., catcalling, appearance commentary, sexualized gazing) constitute instances of sexual violence against women (Kozee et al., 2007). Outside of interpersonal interactions, an objectifying gaze is ever-present in media imagery (Ward, 2016), in which imagery promotes both the objectification of women as well as unrealistic beauty ideals. A plethora of research has revealed that the objectifying culture women live in has adverse cognitive, behavioral, and social (for a review see Roberts et al., 2018) consequences for women.

Many of these consequences are not merely due to the fact that women experience or are exposed to objectification, but that women are socialized in this ubiquitous culture of objectification which leads to a chronic view of the self as an object (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This self-perspective, referred to as self-objectification, involves an increased level of body consciousness (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Because women understand the societal expectations surrounding their appearance, this body consciousness is one method women rely on to help them gain the benefits associated with successfully meeting societal appearance expectations (e.g., popularity) as well as avoid the consequences of failure (e.g., criticism) (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In attempts to predict how others will perceive them, women high in self-objectification have internalized a third person perspective of their

bodies and as a result engage in high levels of *body surveillance*. This chronic body monitoring involves behaviors like commonly thinking about their appearance and prioritizing how their body looks over how their body feels. Given that many societal appearance and beauty ideals are not attainable for many women, this chronic surveying of one's body from an outsider's perspective leads to higher *feelings of body shame* (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). **That is, when women self-objectify, this perspective involves habitual appearance self-monitoring (i.e., body surveillance) that frequently results in negative emotional states, and feelings of body shame in particular (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moya-Garófano & Moya, 2019); in other words, body surveillance acts as an antecedent of body shame (Calogero, 2004, 2010).**

Engaging in body surveillance and feeling resulting body shame has been found to lead to detrimental consequences for women's mental health broadly and their sexual health more specifically (for a review see Calogero et al., 2019). For example, women's levels of body surveillance and body shame are negatively associated with sexual satisfaction (Calogero & Thompson, 2009). One reason this may occur is because engaging in body surveillance and experiencing feelings of shame consume mental resources needed to be mentally present in the sexual activity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Indeed, body shame predicts greater self-consciousness during physical intimacy, which in turn predicts lower sexual pleasure and sexual arousal (Claudat & Warren, 2014; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007). Moreover, women's body surveillance and body shame have been found to disrupt women's ability to attend to their internal bodily cues (Calogero, 2012), which in turn jeopardizes women's awareness of their own internal bodily states and emotions (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglana, 2002). While **thinking about** how one appears to their partner may be normal within a sexual interaction, women high in self-objectification are surveying their body and feeling levels of shame that result in body exposure anxiety and

oftentimes sexual avoidance (Claudat et al., 2012). In unwanted sexual situations, women who are self-objectifying are narrowly focused on their appearance opposed to considering their feelings, thoughts, or goals within the situation. Because of this myopic perspective, women high in self-objectification may be less likely to recognize that they are uncomfortable in an unwanted sexual encounter and as a result may be less able to readily identify a situation as coercive. This idea is in line with survey work by Franz and colleagues (2017), who showed that higher body surveillance and lower sexual assertiveness mediated the association between women's body evaluation and sexual victimization, concluding that body surveillance is a risk factor for sexual victimization. High levels of self-objectification damages women's sexual assertiveness because self-objectifying women have internalized the notion that their sexuality is subject to men's will (Franz et al., 2017). Together, this suggests that while it is not the fault of women that sexual assault occurs, women's self-objectification may make it more complicated for women to leave instances in which sexual violence may occur.

Men's perceptions of women as sexual objects that exist to gratify their desires lays the foundation for more extreme instances of sexual violence (e.g., rape; Awasthi, 2017). The Social Interaction Model of Objectification (SIMO; Gervais et al., 2020) has been conceptualized to illuminate how interactions involving objectification may end in sexual violence. Specifically, the SIMO outlines processes within interactions between men and women that are characterized by each individuals' sexual goals for the interaction. The SIMO suggests that in some instances fit occurs – men and women both come to the interaction with sexual desires present or absent. Yet, interactions in which men and women do not share sexual desires are characterized as instances of misfit, which can ultimately lead to different manifestations of sexual violence. According to the SIMO, a sexist male with a sex goal will see women in terms of whether they are able to satisfy his desires, and in situations of misfit

in which the woman does not have objectifying sexual goals activated, this may result in the man relying on sexual violence to fulfill his desires. Importantly, within the SIMO, the authors suggest that women also come into this interaction with their own thoughts, feelings, and desires, with women high in self-objectification focusing on the extent to which they could satisfy men's sexual goals. **Together, the SIMO highlights the importance of understanding women's perceptions of themselves and the situation within sexual interactions as they unfold.**

Survey research has revealed that women's self-objectification, assessed by levels of body surveillance and feelings of body shame, is directly related to experiencing sexual violence (Davidson & Gervais, 2015), meaning that women who chronically survey their bodies and experience feelings of body shame to a higher extent, have experienced a higher frequency of sexual victimization. Importantly, self-surveillance and body shame negatively affects women's sexual agency, meaning that women who internalize self-objectification are less likely to exhibit sexual agency (i.e., expressing what she wants and what she does not want to do sexually; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015) and sexual assertiveness (Manago et al., 2015). Focusing on the sexual violence occurring within intimate relationships, Sáez and colleagues (2019) demonstrated that having a partner who objectifies you is related to women's diminished capacity to refuse sex, which predicts a higher probability of suffering sexual coercion, ultimately negatively impacting women's sexual satisfaction.

Although correlational research does not reveal which comes first, the self-objectification or the sexual victimization, **it is likely that women who are victims of sexual violence experience increases in their self-objectification. Because self-objectification is prompted by interpersonal experiences of objectification and sexual violence is an extreme manifestation of sexual objectification (Davidson and Gervais, 2015; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), engaging in high levels of self-objectification is likely a consequence of**

sexual victimization. For victims of sexual violence, these women may be more likely to consider their self-worth as contingent upon their partner's perception of them – increasing their body monitoring, which may make them experience body shame. Given the detrimental consequences of women's self-objectification to their cognitive and emotional processing, this may in turn increase their likelihood of experiencing sexual violence again in the future. The current work expands on this previously identified correlational link by focusing on whether self-objectification may act as a risk factor for future sexual victimization. Specifically, we investigated whether women's body surveillance and resulting body shame interrupt their ability to quickly perceive the potential risk of sexual violence, which would adversely affect their likelihood of leaving a situation before it escalates to sexual assault (e.g., Decker & Littleton, 2018; Rinehart & Yeater, 2015).

### **Risk Recognition and Risk Response of Sexual Violence**

Previous literature has focused on differences between victims and nonvictims in their perceptions and responses to the risk of sexual violence using an adapted version of the response-latency paradigm (Marx & Gross, 1995). The original paradigm requested women to identify when a man had gone too far in a sexual assault encounter (represented through an audio recording). Research using this paradigm has found that perceptions differ, depending on whether women have been previously victimized, with delayed risk recognition scores among victims relative to nonvictims (e.g., Chu et al., 2014; Soler-Baillo et al., 2005). Importantly, the adapted version (Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006) differentiates between risk recognition of a threatening situation and the response given to that risk situation, by not only asking participants to indicate the point at which they first feel uncomfortable (risk recognition), but also when they would leave the situation (risk response). Numerous studies have employed this adapted version through different situations of sexual violence (e.g., sexual assault, sexual coercion) using written scenarios (e.g., Messman-Moore & Brown,



2006; Neilson et al., 2018), audio recordings (e.g., Anderson & Cahill, 2014), or videotapes (e.g., Garrido-Macías et al., 2020), demonstrating that victimized women took more time to indicate that they would leave the situation than nonvictims. However, despite the presence of studies that corroborate the relationship between previous experiences of sexual victimization and the risk recognition delay when presented with a new situation involving sexual violence, few studies have attempted to illuminate psychological mechanisms for why this link exists. For instance, despite the strong correlational links between women's experiences of sexual violence and levels of self-objectification, to our knowledge, there is no previous research focused on analyzing whether self-objectification could influence perceptions of sexual violence. Social and cognitive consequences of high levels of self-objectification suggest women may experience greater difficulty in recognizing the moment in which a new experience of sexual violence becomes a risky situation and as a result experience greater delay in deciding to leave such situations.

### **Overview and Hypotheses**

In this study, we expand upon previous work showing that self-objectification makes women vulnerable to sexual violence victimization (e.g., Franz et al., 2017) by examining the role of women's feelings (body shame) and perceptions of an interaction involving sexual aggression. First, we examined whether women's past sexual coercion victimization affects women's level of key manifestations of self-objectification: self-surveillance (Hypothesis 1a) and body shame (Hypothesis 1b). **Secondly, with the aim to explore whether women's victimization increases self-objectification, and in turn, the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence again in the future, the explanatory mechanism of the relation between women's past sexual coercion victimization and potential for future victimization was tested. Specifically, we hypothesized an indirect relation between women's past sexual coercion**

victimization and the time spent before leaving a sexually coercive scenario though level of chronic body surveillance, feelings of body shame, and perceptions of risk (Hypothesis 2).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 65 female Spanish college students from a private university in the south of Spain. Inclusion criteria for participating included: identifying as female, at least 18 years of age, and being involved in a romantic relationship; although not an initial inclusion criterion, we excluded data from one participant because she identified as homosexual. The remaining 64 participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old ( $M = 19.81$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). All women were involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the study, with an average duration of 19.65 months ( $SD = 16.82$ ). Furthermore, 60.9% of women reported having experienced a form of sexual coercion from an intimate partner (e.g., manipulations, threats, violence, or physical force) at some point in their life.

### **Procedure**

The sample was recruited via non-probabilistic sampling methods. A research assistant requested women's collaboration to participate in a study entitled, *Psychosocial variables related to intimate partner violence*. Following recruitment, the research assistant gave information regarding the voluntary nature of the study, guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, as well as the study's approximate duration. All measures and procedures were approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee (blinded for peer review) prior to data collection. After providing consent, participants completed the first part of the experiment through the e-prime program. Specifically, women watched a scene from a Spanish film about a college couple in an intimate relationship that ends with the man coercing the woman into having unwanted sex. During this viewing, women were asked to imagine they were the female protagonist, and the male was their partner. Once the video

ended, participants completed a five-minute-long distractor task in which they were asked about their ideal vacation destinations. Following the distractor, participants moved on to the second part of the experiment using a paper-and-pencil survey. In the context of a larger survey, including questionnaires outside the scope of this manuscript, participants reported on their experiences of intimate partner sexual coercion and their levels of self-objectification. Once the study was finished, women were thanked and fully debriefed.

## Measures

**Risk Perception of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence.** An adaptation of the Risk Perception Survey (RPS) developed by Messman-Moore and Brown (2006) and used by Garrido-Macías and colleagues (2020) was employed to assess risk perception of intimate partner sexual violence. The original RPS is a written scenario depicting a heterosexual encounter with a series of statements that increase the risk for sexual assault, and participant's task is to identify when they first feel uncomfortable (*risk recognition score*), and when they would leave the situation described in the scenario (*risk response score*). In the present study, we followed the procedure used by Garrido-Macías and colleagues (2020) utilizing a videotape where the risk of sexual violence was defined by the increasing severity of the tactics used by the perpetrator. Specifically, participants were presented with a 165-second-long video clip from the Spanish film called "No estás sola, Sara" ["You are not alone, Sara"] (Villalba & Sedes, 2009). This scene involves intimate partner sexual violence in which a man first tries to use verbal coercion and later physical force to rape his partner. In this scene, a couple of university students involved in a romantic relationship are studying for a university exam in the woman's bedroom. Over the course of the interaction, the man attempts to persuade his girlfriend to have sexual intercourse using an increasingly serious sequence of verbally coercive behaviors (e.g., verbal pressure, signs of disgusts and anger; within the first 105 seconds), which then escalates to physical force (e.g., holding her arms

and legs, throwing her to the floor, blocking her body; for the last 60 seconds of the film) with the aim to have sex with her. Throughout the entire interaction, the woman responds with verbal refusal and resistance, clearly indicating that she does not want to have sexual intercourse with her partner.

Prior to watching the film, participants were not given any indication of the nature of the scene but were instructed to imagine themselves as the protagonist of the clip and the man as their partner. While watching the scene, participants were instructed to press a button, initially to indicate when they would first feel uncomfortable with the situation (risk recognition score), and a second time when they would leave the scenario (risk response score). Both scores are measured in seconds, with higher numbers indicating later risk recognition and later risk response toward intimate partner sexual violence. Once participants pressed the button a second time to indicate they would leave the situation, this action stopped the video. Importantly, to assure that participants did not continue the video out of curiosity, they were told that if they did stop the video, they would have an opportunity to watch the ending of the video at the conclusion of the study.

**Sexual Coercion Victimization.** The abbreviated version of the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationship Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004) used by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020) assessed women's experiences of intimate partner sexual coercion. Women indicated whether they had experienced any of 19 specific acts of sexual coercion that included manipulations (e.g., "my partner persisted in asking me to have sex with him, even though he knew that I did not want to."), threats (e.g., "my partner told me that other couples have sex more than we do, to make me feel like I should have sex with him."), and use of violence and physical force (e.g., "my partner threatened to use violence against me if I did not have sex with him"). Women who had not experienced any of the acts of sexual coercion were categorized as nonvictims, whereas women who had experienced at least one

act of sexual coercion were categorized as victims. This categorization resulted in 39 victims of intimate partner sexual coercion and 25 nonvictims within the total sample.

**Body Surveillance.** The Body Surveillance subscale of the Spanish version of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; Moya-Garófano et al., 2017) was used to assess the extent to which participants surveyed their appearance and thought about how their body looks to others. This subscale is composed of 8 items (e.g., “I often worry about whether the clothes I am wearing make me look good”) to which women rated their agreement to using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*), with a NA (*Not applicable*) option. Responses were averaged such that higher numbers indicated more self-surveillance ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

**Body Shame:** The Body Shame subscale of the Spanish version of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; Moya-Garófano et al., 2017) was used to assess the extent to which participants felt shame resulting from the impossibility of attaining the imposed ideal of beauty and failing to live up to cultural body standards. Women rated their agreement with 8 items (e.g., “I feel ashamed of myself when I haven’t made the effort to look my best”) using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*) with a NA (*Not applicable*) option. Responses were averaged such that higher numbers indicated more feelings of shame ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Covariates:** Given previous connections found between women’s body shape and size and engagement in self-objectification (Ramseyer Winter, 2016), we also measured the weight and height of the participants in order to calculate their body mass index (BMI) and use it as a control variable.

## Results

### *Preliminary analysis*

Pearson bivariate correlation analyses were performed to investigate the relationships among study variables; Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. The average score of risk recognition ( $M = 70.77$ ,  $SD = 28.38$ ) reflects the moment in which women first felt uncomfortable, whereas the average score of risk response ( $M = 102.46$ ,  $SD = 31.51$ ) indicates the moment in which women decided to leave the situation. Both risk recognition and risk response were positively correlated ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, body surveillance was positively correlated with body shame ( $p < .001$ ) and previous sexual coercion victimization ( $p = .014$ ). Finally, greater body shame was significantly associated with greater risk recognition scores ( $p = .028$ ) and greater BMI ( $p = .001$ ).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

### **Sexual Coercion Victimization and Self-Objectification**

With the aim to explore differences in levels of body surveillance (Hypothesis 1a), and body shame (Hypothesis 1b) between victims and nonvictims of sexual coercion, a t-test was conducted. In support of Hypothesis 1a, results showed a significant effect of sexual coercion victimization on reported body surveillance ( $t(62) = -2.54$ ,  $p = .014$ ). Specifically, victims of sexual coercion reported higher levels of body surveillance ( $M = 5.23$ ;  $SD = 0.86$ ) than nonvictims ( $M = 4.65$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ). However, Hypothesis 1b was not supported, as sexual coercion victimization was not found to significantly shape body shame ( $t(62) = -1.03$ ,  $p = .308$ ); victims ( $M = 3.84$ ;  $SD = 1.29$ ) and nonvictims ( $M = 3.48$ ;  $SD = 1.49$ ) reported similar levels of body shame.

### **The Indirect Effect of Past Sexual Coercion Victimization on Risk Response**

Finally, to test whether body surveillance, body shame, and later risk recognition are explanatory mechanisms in the relation between past sexual coercion victimization and a later risk response in a specific sexual aggression situation (Hypothesis 2), a serial mediation analysis was run. Specifically, we examined the indirect effect of past sexual coercion

victimization (X) on risk response (Y) with body surveillance (M1), body shame (M2), and risk recognition (M3) as serial mediators, and BMI as a covariate using Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013; Model 6). Following Hayes' (2013) procedures for testing indirect effects, bias-corrected confidence intervals for indirect associations were estimated based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. Confidence intervals that do not contain zero indicate that effects are significant ( $p < .05$ ). As Figure 1 illustrates, women's past sexual coercion victimization was associated with higher body surveillance. Likewise, a direct effect emerged between body surveillance and body shame; higher levels of body surveillance were associated with higher levels of body shame. Furthermore, body shame directly predicted risk recognition, so that higher levels of body shame were associated with later risk recognition responses. For its part, the direct path between risk recognition and risk response did emerge, showing that later response latencies for perceiving the situation as uncomfortable were associated with higher response latencies for leaving the situation (see Figure 1). More importantly and consistent with Hypothesis 2, women's past sexual coercion victimization was indirectly linked to later risk responses through increased body surveillance, which increased body shame, and delayed risk recognition ( $b_{\text{unstandardized coefficient}} = 4099.23$ ,  $SE = 3091.24$ , 95% CI [20.97, 11533.68]). This pattern of results suggests that women's past sexual coercion victimization is related to delayed responses to leaving interactions involving intimate partner sexual violence by increasing women's levels of body surveillance and, in turn, body shame which, finally, is related to taking longer to experience discomfort with the sexually violent situation. Furthermore, as Figure 1 illustrates, the indirect effects of women's past sexual coercion victimization on risk response via the unique effect of body surveillance ( $b_{\text{unstandardized coefficient}} = -1816.48$ ,  $SE = 7803.54$ , 95% CI [-18821.46, 18850.57]), body shame ( $b_{\text{unstandardized coefficient}} = -65.37$ ,  $SE = 1886.82$ , 95% CI [-1981.85, 1525.34]) or the unique effect of risk recognition score ( $b_{\text{unstandardized coefficient}} = -3368.49$ ,  $SE = 8065.31$ , 95% CI [-20708.13,

11092.08]) were not present. These results reinforce the hypothesis that women's past sexual coercion victimization predicts later risk response score through both, body surveillance and body shame, and risk recognition, confirming Hypothesis 2.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

## Discussion

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) noted that “when objectified, women are treated as bodies” and when women self-objectify they “treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated” (p. 175). A plethora of research supports objectification theory, revealing that women's self-objectification is related to a host of individual and interpersonal consequences (Roberts et al., 2018), including intimate partner violence (Sáez et al., 2020). In the study of sexual objectification and intimate partner violence, a gendered perspective is needed because power and patriarchal dynamics mean that women are the primary victims of objectification and violence (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005; WHO, 2012). **The focus of the present work was to examine an explanatory mechanism in the relation between sexual coercion victimization and intimate partner sexual violence by analyzing whether women's levels of body surveillance and body shame are related to perceptions and responses to a situation involving intimate partner sexual violence.**

The first aim of this study was to assess the relation between women's previous intimate partner sexual coercion victimization and levels of self-objectification. As expected, victims of sexual coercion reported higher levels of body surveillance than women without past sexual coercion victimization. This finding is consistent with the existing literature that found a direct and positive association between experiences of intimate partner violence and body surveillance (e.g., Davidson & Gervais, 2015), showing that intimate partner sexual violence has negative consequences for women's self-perception. Furthermore, Ramsey and Hoyt (2015) suggested that self-objectification could increase the likelihood of sexual



coercion victimization, because of higher levels of body shame and lower levels of sexual agency. Yet, the relation between sexual coercion and body shame, was somewhat unexpectedly not found in the current work. Although unexpected, previous research has also failed to find an association between sexual coercion (i.e., violence or resource manipulation and commitment manipulation) and body shame (Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015). This lack of association might be explained because body shame needs to be understood as mechanism within the self-objectification process; specifically, body shame is a consequence of continuous body self-monitoring, and not only the degree to which women internalize cultural beauty standards.

The second objective of the current work was to explore the association found between women's sexual coercion victimization and body surveillance. While previous work demonstrates a link between experiencing intimate partner sexual violence and self-objectification, the direction of such relation is still not clear. On one hand, past victimization could lead women to internalize the objectifying perspective their partner has of them, leading women to engage in body surveillance and feel body shame in attempts to be a worthy object. On the other hand, increased levels of body surveillance and body shame adversely affect women's sexual agency and sexual assertiveness which could impact their ability to recognize and respond to instances of intimate partner violence in a manner that would terminate the interaction. Despite the fact that perpetrators of sexual violence are the sole individuals responsible for this occurrence, the patriarchal society women live in teaches women to suppress their sexual desires and agency which increases the likelihood of sexual victimization. Results revealed that, **after experiencing past sexual coercion victimization**, higher levels of body surveillance are related to later decisions to leave a situation involving intimate partner sexual violence via higher levels of body shame and a longer delay in indicating that they feel uncomfortable in the situation (risk recognition). This result is in line

with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) assertion that self-objectification leads to a reduction of internal awareness, and Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama's (2002) finding that self-objectification hinders women's recognition of their psychological states. This lack of recognition is most likely a result of disrupted cognitive functioning due to women's assumption of others' perspective of themselves consuming cognitive resources (Gay & Castano, 2010). Results from the current work suggest that women's body surveillance interfere with their ability to respond to instances of intimate partner sexual violence because body surveillance increases feelings of body shame which adversely impact women's ability to recognize their own feelings of discomfort in these situations.

In regard to the question of whether victimization increases women's self-objectification or whether women's self-objectification increases likelihood of victimization, our work supports both paths. We found that women with previous experiences of sexual coercion reported higher levels of body surveillance and women with higher levels of self-objectification showed a diminished response to an instance of intimate partner violence. Given these findings, it is likely that intimate partner violence operates through a vicious cycle in which victimization leads women to self-objectify, adversely impacting their ability to recognize and respond to future instances of sexual violence. Because women high in self-objectification have already internalized their partner's perspective of themselves, women may diminish negative responses to new situations of sexual violence to justify their current partner's behavior (e.g., Garrido-Macías et al., 2020; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006).

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The present study provides important contributions for literature on objectification and sexual violence, showing the important role of self-objectification in women's reactions to a situation of intimate partner sexual violence. Nevertheless, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. First, the sample of this research

presents certain characteristics that could complicate the generalization of results presented here. For instance, the sample was composed of university students who, despite being appropriate for this study given that the video stimuli showed a situation usually occurring between young college couples, this largely shaped the duration of participants' current relationships. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that, although the procedure used was rigorous, the sample size obtained was lower than expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, which hastily stopped data collection. **Consequently, the statistical power of the results presented in this work is limited.** Future studies should use samples that are both larger and composed of women of various ages and in committed relationships with more variation in length, to be able to evaluate the replicability of the results.

Second, women responded about their perceptions and intentions regarding a hypothetical sexual violence situation shown in a film clip. Thus, their reports may not match their responses in equivalent real-life situations, due to social desirability effects and the safety of the lab setting, which allowed women to press the button without any social pressure. In future replications, follow-up questions on how participants would attempt to leave the situation or how participants are attributing blame in the situation could be informative in determining how women would think in more realistic situations.

Furthermore, participants were instructed to direct their attention to threat-related stimuli in order to decide when they felt uncomfortable and when they would leave the situation. Therefore, participants were alerted to an adverse situation about to unfold, which is an advantage they would not have in real life and that may also have influenced their responses. Future research should replicate the present study by exposing women to sexual violence situations that favor responses as faithful as possible to real life.

## **Conclusions and Practical Implications**

The current research highlights the importance of assessing sexual objectification as a risk factor that could influence women's responses to intimate partner sexual violence. Even though these results are not the first to suggest a relation between objectification and sexual violence victimization (e.g., Davidson & Gervais, 2015; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015), the model tested suggests that, **after experiencing past sexual coercion victimization**, increased levels of body surveillance increase the time women take to respond to a situation of intimate partner sexual violence due to a lack of awareness of the negative feelings associated with experiencing sexual aggression. The findings presented here provide empirical support to previous studies showing the relation between sexual coercion victimization and women's levels of self-surveillance. These results emphasize the need for further research into variables that increase the risk of suffering sexual victimization within relationships, especially in its more subtle forms.

The findings presented here, may contribute significantly to the prevention of future experiences of sexual victimization, by suggesting the necessity to expand intervention programs to include variables such as self-objectification, which can also have an important and not well-recognized role in the responses that women have to this type of gender violence. Comprehensive sexual education promotes the notion of sexual responsibility including the respect for oneself (Sioux, 2009). Increasing women's internal awareness, can improve women's ability to identify their emotions, including the uncomfortable feelings associated with a sexual situation that might warn woman regarding the potential for danger.

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