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*Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2011 35: 38
DOI: 10.1177/0361684310385217

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://pwq.sagepub.com/content/35/1/38
Are Contemporary Media Images Which Seem to Display Women as Sexually Empowered Actually Harmful to Women?

Emma Halliwell¹, Helen Malson¹, and Irmgard Tischner²

Abstract
There has been a shift in the depiction of women in advertising from objectifying representations of women as passive sex objects to agentic sexual representations where the women appear powerful and in control (Gill, 2007a, 2008), and there is substantial evidence that these representations have a negative impact on women’s body image. However, to our knowledge, this study is the first experimental research that aims to compare passively objectifying and more recent sexually agentic representations. British undergraduate women (N = 122) participated in an experiment in which they were randomly assigned to view sexually passive, sexually agentic, or control print advertisements. Exposure to both types of representations of women, compared to viewing control images, was associated with increased weight dissatisfaction. The sexually agentic representations were singularly associated with increased state self-objectification. Media exposure research tends to focus on the models (e.g., their thinness) shown in advertising and pay little attention to the framing of the image. Our results highlight the powerful impact different framings can have on women’s body image concerns as well as suggest that recent shifts in advertising may be particularly problematic because contemporary images increased both weight concern and self-objectification. Therefore, these images may have a more powerful impact on psychological well-being and disordered eating behaviors than traditional images.

Keywords
body image, physical attractiveness, body weight, mass media, advertising, empowerment

We investigate the impact of contemporary advertising images on aspects of young British women’s body evaluations. Drawing on Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and recent critiques of advertising (Gill, 2007a, 2008), we explore experimentally whether recent changes in the framing of women depicted in advertising images have an impact on women’s immediate self-evaluations and on their reactions to the advertisements. Typically, experimental research in this field compares exposure to ultra-thin models with exposure to control images that do not display models or, in a few cases, to average size models. The focus to date has been on the model’s body weight, with little attention being given to the slogans framing the images of women. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to compare the impact of these different framings of the thin ideal on women.

A substantial body of research has examined associations between media representations of female beauty and women’s body image concerns and self-esteem. Correlational studies consistently demonstrate a positive relationship between exposure to appearance-focused media and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Harrison, 2001; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). In addition, there is some longitudinal evidence that exposure to body-focused media leads to increased body dissatisfaction among vulnerable girls and women (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001). Experimental studies generally report that exposure to ultrathin bodies idealized in the media leads to body dissatisfaction, weight dissatisfaction, and negative affect among many women (e.g., Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002) across countries such as Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States (Grabe et al., 2008). There is also some evidence that exposure to these images has a direct impact on women’s food restriction (e.g., Krahe & Krause, 2010; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). Negative media exposure

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effects can be explained by the extent to which women make self-evaluative social comparisons with media models (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010).

Images of artificial and sexualized female beauty are implicated in Objectification Theory as causing women to internalize an observer’s perspective about themselves and their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Consistent with this reasoning, Aubrey (2006) found that trait self-objectification was related to exposure to sexually objectifying TV shows. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that repeated exposure to direct and indirect pressures to match cultural beauty ideals leads women to internalize the motives for their efforts to improve their appearance as freely chosen, or even natural. As Spitzack (1990) argued, when the desire to be beautiful is constructed as a personal choice, rather than an externally imposed prescription, women are more willing to strive for an idealized appearance. Research investigating the causes and consequences of self-objectification has explored individual differences in women’s self-reported levels of trait self-objectification and also the impact of situational factors on levels of state self-objectification experienced at a specific moment (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Temporary fluctuations in self-objectification are referred to as state self-objectification and are the focus of our article.

Research investigating individual differences in trait self-objectification indicate that the internalization of an observer’s view of the self is associated with a host of negative states including disordered eating (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005; Greenleaf, 2005; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tylka & Hill, 2004) and depression (Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005). Temporary fluctuations in state self-objectification have been explored by placing participants in situations which heighten self-objectification such as standing in front of a mirror wearing revealing clothes (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998) or anticipating interacting with a male stranger (Calogero, 2004). Harper and Tiggemann (2008) found that viewing advertisements featuring ultrathin models leads to increased state self-objectification, compared to viewing control images.

Based on her analysis of media images, Gill (2007a, 2008) discusses a recent change in how women are represented in advertising wherein representations of women as fairly passive sexual objects are increasingly replaced by representations of women as active subjects (Goldman, 1992). As such, advertisers increasingly frame images of women as liberated and in control. However, the mode through which women’s control is displayed in this new breed of advertising is in “the commodification of their appearance” (Gill, 2007a, p. 89). In part, this approach can be seen as a response by advertisers to feminist criticisms of the depiction of women as passive objects of male desire (Gill, 2007a; Goldman, 1992) such that more “post-feminist” advertisements now represent women as actively sexually agentic. This analysis is consistent with Levy’s (2005) critique of shifts in contemporary culture whereby women are now encouraged to display their liberation and empowerment through their own sexualization. She argues that the emergence of “raunch culture” is not commonly understood as signaling the failure of feminism, but instead as a result of the achievements made through feminism. This rationalization of raunch culture argues that women are now liberated enough to take pleasure in presenting themselves as sex objects, for example through reading porn or taking lap dancing classes. There is evidence that these changes have an impact on women’s behavior. Research shows that viewing sexually objectifying depictions of women in the media is positively related to young women’s likely participation in self-sexualizing behaviors (such as taking part in a wet t-shirt competition or attending pole dancing classes) and their acceptance of such behaviors in other women (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009).

Gill (2007a) describes three contemporary “postfeminist” constructions of women that emphasize this female sexual empowerment: exposure of the young, heterosexually desirable “midriff” (mid-torso); the vengeful woman set on punishing her partner or ex-partner for his transgressions; and the “hot lesbian” displayed entwined with another beautiful woman. The most dominant of these, the “midriff,” portrays “a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for it’ (that is, sex)” (p. 41). These midriff images are objectified images in that they typically focus on ultrathin, White, young female bodies, yet in contrast to traditional passive images, they emphasize women’s presumed empowerment and sexual confidence. These images represent, therefore, “a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification” (p. 41). Rather than women being displayed as objects of male desire, in the new representations women are portrayed as actively choosing to display themselves sexually in order to demonstrate their independence and liberation (Gill, 2007a). The four key characteristics of midriff images are that they focus not just on women’s bodies but also on their sexual agency, autonomy, and empowerment. Often this framing is achieved through the use of humorous and ironic slogans. Young women read these images in complex ways and, to some extent, they are viewed as entertaining, but at the same time, these models’ power is understood as being limited to their sexual appeal (Malson, Halliwell, Tischner, & Rüdolfsdóttir, in press). This paradox is consistent with feminist analyses of postfeminist cultures (e.g., Amy-Chinn, 2006), illustrating that these images cannot be viewed “as wholly ‘good’ or wholly ‘bad’” (Malson et al., in press).

The sexually agentic framing of woman apparently challenges the equation of femininity with passivity (e.g., Jordanova, 1989) and the denial of female sexual desire (Fine, 1988) in earlier advertising. Gill (2008) notes that it is possible to interpret this change in media representations of women positively because it acknowledges women’s
sexual desire. Furthermore, Gill argues that their humor and irony may make these images more appealing to women. However, it is still women’s sexual attractiveness that is central to the image. This new representation, despite its connotations of empowerment, must conform to all the same constraints and efforts of constructing beauty as traditional images wherein the woman’s value remains solely physical.

Theoretically then, both representations of women as passive sexual objects and as agentic sexual subjects are depictions of self-objectification because they prioritize women’s appearance over any other characteristic. Indeed, the sexually agentic framing of women may actually amplify state self-objectification. Gill (2007a, 2008) argues that contemporary depictions of women as sexually agentic, although responding to feminist critiques about the objectification of women, are nevertheless more pernicious than passively objectifying depictions. In many contemporary representations, women appear to actively court the male gaze and yet, at the same time, they also appear to have internalized the perspective of this male gaze as their own. This internalization is central to understandings of self-objectification. In this sense, such contemporary representations may be more powerful in leading women to internalize an outsiders’ (masculinist) viewpoint and thus to engage in state self-objectification. However, these contemporary depictions of women (as agetically rather than passively sexual) may also be more difficult to challenge, particularly because the new figures of sexual agency appear to offer empowerment and a welcome shift away from passive representations (Gill, 2008). It is important, then, to investigate women’s evaluation of these images as well as the impact they have on women’s body image and self-objectification.

Our study, therefore, extends previous literature because it is the first known study to examine how the framing of advertising images to emphasize women’s presumed sexual empowerment or passivity impacts women’s reactions, specifically, state self-objectification and weight dissatisfaction. We included state weight dissatisfaction because it focuses specifically on women’s evaluation of their weight rather than their appearance more generally and has been shown to be particularly affected by media exposure (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2008).

In our study, the passively objectifying representations of women were operationalized through the presentation of images of women in their underwear framed by slogans emphasizing their physical appearance. In contrast, the sexually agentic representations were operationalized by framing these same images with slogans emphasizing the woman’s control, empowerment, and sexual self-confidence. Our first hypothesis is that, because the characteristics of idealized beauty do not differ between the images, women will report higher levels of weight dissatisfaction after viewing images of ultrathin models, regardless of framing than after viewing control images (not featuring women). In contrast, the additional emphasis on sexual empowerment in agentic images may well have a stronger impact than passive representations on women’s levels of self-objectification because such portrayals increase striving for an idealized appearance (Spitzack, 1990). Hence, our second hypothesis is that state self-objectification will be higher after exposure to the sexually agentic framing compared to the objectifying framing or control images. Finally, we will examine women’s evaluation of each of these advertising images. Due to the apparent empowerment represented in the sexually agentic framing, our third hypothesis is that the sexually agentic framing will be rated more positively than the passively objectifying framing.

Method

Participants

Female psychology students (N = 122) in the United Kingdom were recruited to take part in a study on “Attitudes to Advertising” in return for course credits. Their mean age was 19.98 years (SD = 3.83, range 18–40), and their mean body mass index (BMI: weight in kg/height in m²) was 22.18 (SD = 3.93, range 14.20–41.87). Most women (114; 95%) identified as White, 4 as Black, and 2 as mixed race; 115 (96%) identified as heterosexual and 5 as bisexual, with 2 participants missing information on each measure. Women were randomly assigned to condition: 41 women to the sexually agentic condition, 38 to the passively objectifying condition, and 43 to the control condition. There was no difference in the age, F(2, 119) = 0.31, p = .73, or BMI, F(2, 114) = 0.31, p = .72, of women assigned to each condition.

Materials and Measures

Advertising images. For the sexually agentic condition, we used five advertisements identified for, and discussed in, Gill’s (2007b) review of advertisements published between 1994 and 2001. All the female models in these images were White. For the objectifying condition, we used the same images, but we changed the slogans so that they focused on the model’s appearance by shifting the frame from sexually agentic to passively objectifying. The first advertisement was for a push-up bra. It displayed a woman holding a ribbon on the bra she is wearing with the accompanying slogan “I love the strings.” In the objectifying condition, this slogan was changed to “For a beautiful figure.” The second advertisement displayed a woman wearing a bra with the slogan “New hair, new look, new bra.” And if he doesn’t like it, new boyfriend” (sexually agentic) or “When it feels great, it looks great” (objectifying). The third advertisement for slimming trousers showed the torso and legs of a woman wearing fishnet stockings stating “While you don’t necessarily dress for men, it doesn’t hurt on occasion to see one drool like the pathetic dog that he is” (sexually agentic) or “Sex appeal and support for a longer, thinner look” (objectifying). The fourth advertisement showed a woman in her underwear reclined in the
hay, with the slogan “Who said a woman can’t get pleasure from something soft” (sexually agentic) or “To look as good as you feel” (objectifying). The final advertisement featured a woman in a bra with “I can’t cook, who cares?” across her cleavage in the sexually agentic condition and no slogan in the objectifying condition.

In the control condition women viewed five product-only advertisements selected from women’s magazines. The first advertisement was for hand cream with the slogan “Discover the secret of Shea Butter,” the second was for body cream with the slogan “Indulge your senses,” the third was for make-up foundation with the slogan “The new foundation from Chanel: A source of youth and light,” and the fourth was for a watch and was accompanied by the brand name but no slogan. The final advertisement was for chewing gum: it featured an image of whitening toothpaste and a toothbrush with the slogan “There is an easier way to keep your teeth white.”

State self-objectification. State self-objectification was measured by adapting Noll and Fredrickson’s (1998) well-validated individual difference measure of trait self-objectification, the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ), to provide a state measure of women’s view of their bodies. Participants indicated the extent to which they viewed their bodies in appearance-based (objectified terms) or competence-based (non-objectified terms) terms. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, 5 of which were appearance-related (weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, firm/sculpted muscles, and measurements) and 5 which were competence-related (physical coordination, strength, energy level, health, and physical fitness). Participants were asked to rank how important they rated each attribute right now from 0 (least impact) to 9 (greatest impact). Final scores were obtained by summing separately the ranks for appearance-based and competence-based items, and then subtracting the sum of competence ranks from the sum of appearance ranks. The possible range of scores was –25 to 25, with higher positive scores indicating greater emphasis on physical appearance and thus higher state self-objectification.

Weight dissatisfaction. The state version of the Self-Discrepancy Index ([SDI] Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1996; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006) was employed as a measure of weight dissatisfaction. The measure asks participants to describe five aspects of themselves that they would ideally like to change right now by filling in the blanks for five sentences of the format “I _____ but I would like ____.” They then rate each self-discrepancy statement in terms of magnitude, ranging from 1 (a little different) to 6 (extremely different), and psychological salience, ranging from 1 (a little important) to 6 (extremely important). This procedure enables us to measure unobtrusively the extent to which respondents are thinking about self-discrepancies specifically related to weight and body size. The SDI has been validated in previous research (e.g., Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006).

The self-statements were coded as weight-related if they explicitly referred to weight or body size, as opposed to other aspects of the self. For example, the statement “I am chubby but I would like to be slimmer” was coded as weight-related, but the statement “I am quiet but I would like to be more outgoing” was coded as unrelated to weight. Two of the authors independently coded the data, and there was 100% agreement between the coders. For the weight-related statements, the magnitude and salience ratings were multiplied and then summed for each individual, giving a single score that ranged from 0 to 180, with higher scores indicating greater state weight dissatisfaction. For example, if a weight-related discrepancy received a difference rating of 6, indicating that it was extremely different, and an importance rating of 4, indicating that it was quite important, the score for that statement would be 24. This product was added to the other weight-related difference × importance products listed by the participant to give a total weight-dissatisfaction score. Previous research has found state weight-dissatisfaction scores in the range of 3.4–15.8 depending on exposure condition and internalization of the thin ideal (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009). There is a danger of introducing demand characteristics in experimental research examining exposure effects, particularly when the body dissatisfaction measure is not disguised (Mills et al., 2002). Therefore, our unobtrusive measure of weight dissatisfaction is well suited to this type of investigation.

Advertising evaluation. Women were asked to give two ratings of their impression of the advertisement and two ratings of their impression of the brand, ranging from 1 (very unfavourable) to 6 (very favourable) and 1 (very negative) to 6 (very positive). They also rated how much they liked the advertisement from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much) and how effective the advertisement was from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very effective). In total, they gave six ratings for each advertisement. Because we were interested in comparing women’s responses to the different framing slogans, we calculated an overall advertising evaluation score for each condition. Cronbach’s αs were .89 for the sexually agentic advertisements, .80 for the objectifying advertisements, and .82 for the control advertisements.

Procedure

To reduce demand characteristics, we were careful to present an appropriate advertising effectiveness cover story. Participants were told that the study investigated women’s attitudes toward advertising and that they would be asked to rate a number of advertisements. They were also told that because current mood and thoughts about oneself are known to influence preferences for advertising, they would be asked a few additional questions about how they were feeling when they took part in the study. Women were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions using a computer-generated randomization table and were given a pack containing the corresponding advertisements and advertising rating scales. This pack
was followed by the state weight dissatisfaction measure, by the state self-objectification measure, and finally by demographic questions (age, height, weight, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relationship status). At the end of the experiment, in order to check that the women had believed the cover story, they were asked to state the purpose of the study in their own words. All of the women were naive to the actual aims of the research and were not aware of the focus on body image or self-objectification. The participants were thanked and given a written debrief reminding them of their right to withdraw now that they knew the true aims of the study and including details about how to contact the researchers.

Results

The mean scores for weight dissatisfaction and state self-objectification for women in each condition are reported in Table 1. Weight dissatisfaction and self-objectification were positively correlated, $r(118) = .26$, $p = .01$.

We conducted an one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test our first hypothesis that weight dissatisfaction would be higher after viewing advertisements in both conditions featuring thin models than in the control condition. There was a statistically significant effect for condition, $F(2,119) = 6.55$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. A post hoc Tukey analysis revealed that weight dissatisfaction was significantly higher after viewing both sexually agentic images ($p = .02$) and objectifying images ($p = .01$) than in the control condition. Moreover, there was no significant difference between levels of weight dissatisfaction in the two model conditions ($p = .75$).

The second hypothesis was that state self-objectification would be higher after viewing the sexually agentic framing than after the objectifying framing or the control images. Again, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for condition, $F(2,115) = 9.42$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Consistent with our hypothesis, state self-objectification was significantly higher in the sexually agentic condition than in both the control condition ($p < .001$) and the objectifying condition ($p = .03$). Furthermore, there was no significant difference between state self-objectification in the objectifying and control conditions ($p = .20$).

Our third hypothesis was that women would rate the sexually agentic advertisements more favorably than the objectifying advertisements. Because the control images were qualitatively different from the images featuring thin idealized models, we ran the analysis only with the two model conditions. There was no significant difference in the overall ratings given in the objectifying condition ($M = 3.58$, $SD = .64$) and the sexually agentic condition ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .84$), $t(77) = .69$, $p = .49$.

Discussion

The present study investigated the impact of framing idealized images of women as passive sexual objects or as agentic sexual subjects on women’s weight dissatisfaction and state self-objectification. Both kinds of representation were associated with increases in women’s weight dissatisfaction compared to viewing control images. This finding is consistent with the vast majority of previous research demonstrating negative media exposure effects on body image, based on the assumption that women make evaluative social comparisons with media models (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005). In addition, we found that the framing of the images was important in terms of their impact on state self-objectification. Viewing contemporary representations of women framed as agentic sexual subjects was associated with higher state self-objectification than viewing control images as well as passive, objectifying representations of women. This finding is consistent with Gill’s (2007a, p. 90) proposal that contemporary representations of women encourage an internalized “self-policing narcissistic gaze.”

Taken together, these two results suggest that contemporary depictions of women as active sexual subjects may be even more damaging than previous representations because they continue to increase weight dissatisfaction among women and in addition lead to more state self-objectification than passive representations. There was no significant difference between the effectiveness ratings given to the objectifying and sexually agentic advertisements, contrary to Gill’s (2007a) suggestion that women find the new representations more appealing.

In the current study, the sexually agentic exposure condition was associated with increased state self-objectification. Although both sets of images display objectifying representations of women, the slogans framing the sexually agentic images refer to women’s sexual appeal and to their sexual power in relationship with men. In contrast, the passively objectifying slogans refer to women’s appearance and the importance of looking good in general. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that the sexualized nature of images of women is central to the process of self-objectification. In addition, research suggests that appearance concerns vary across situations and are considered particularly important in intimate relationships (Cash, 2002). Therefore, emphasizing sexual relationships may be a particularly powerful way to elicit state self-objectification.

Table 1. Mean Scores for Weight Dissatisfaction and State Self-Objectification for Each Experimental Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Weight Dissatisfaction</th>
<th>State Self-Objectification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually agentic</td>
<td>13.76</td>
<td>14.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectifying</td>
<td>16.08</td>
<td>18.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>8.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ in the post hoc Tukey comparison.
Our findings are not fully consistent with those of Harper and Tiggemann (2008), because exposure to the passively objectifying framings of women in our study did not lead to increased state self-objectification compared to the control condition. The reasons for this inconsistency are unclear. Harper and Tiggemann used examples of advertising from women’s magazines, but they do not provide information about the framing of the images, and it may well be that they included sexually agentic representations in their sample. However, there were also differences in the way that self-objectification was assessed in these studies. One notable difference is that Harper and Tiggemann used an idiographic method, so participants reported any aspect of themselves which was salient, whereas we used the SOQ, which is nomothetic and requires ratings of particular body attributes. In fact, in this respect, Harper and Tiggemann’s measure is similar to our measure of weight dissatisfaction, and it is important to note that the findings of the two studies are consistent on these idiographic measures.

The advertising effectiveness cover story was convincing because none of the women guessed our focus on the impact of media representations on body image and self-objectification. Furthermore, the unobtrusive assessment of weight dissatisfaction is a methodological strength of our study. However, our study assessed only short-term exposure effects in a relatively small sample. There is evidence that exposure effects are compounded over longer periods; for example, Stice, Spangler, and Agras (2001) found that subscription to a teenage fashion magazine led to increased body image concerns among vulnerable girls. Furthermore, negative reactions to thin media models in an exposure experiment predicted body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness 2 years later (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). Therefore, we would expect that exposure to agentic images also has a cumulative effect on women’s self-objectification and weight dissatisfaction.

It would have been informative to, and future research should include an additional condition where advertisements featuring nonsexualized framings of women are used. This addition would allow us to disentangle further the impact of viewing thin idealized models per se from the impact of viewing these models framed as sexualized in various ways. Indeed the substantial evidence that media exposure leads to negative body evaluation (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008) points to the powerful impact of viewing any images of idealized beauty. The current study focused on sexual empowerment. There are, of course, alternative representations of empowerment (e.g., Zerbe-Enns, 2004) that have not been examined here. Clearly, advertising communicates multiple messages about the construction of femininity and women’s reading of responses to these messages will be equally complex. The value of the current research is in demonstrating that agentic, sexualized framings of idealized beauty may be more damaging than passive representations.

The current study attempted to isolate and change the framing of the image while keeping all other aspects of the model images identical. This approach has some clear strengths because we can be confident in attributing differences in women’s self-objectification to the differences in the slogan framing between conditions. However, the approach also lacks some ecological validity because many aspects of an image also indicate agency and power. Future research should compare the impact of passive and agentic images currently in circulation.

A further limitation is that the sample consisted of young, primarily White, and heterosexual women so that it is unclear whether the exposure effects demonstrated here would extend to a more diverse sample, particularly considering that dominant representations of beauty display young and White bodies. There is evidence that the nature of women’s body image concerns are related to ethnicity, for example African American women report less body dissatisfaction and less frequent problems and eating disorders are increasingly evident among girls and women of all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds (Gordon, 2001), and this pervasiveness is frequently understood in terms of a globalization of beauty ideals (Bordo, 2009). Furthermore, exposure to media featuring Black models and actresses is associated with Black adolescent girls’ endorsement of the importance of appearance (Gordon, 2008). The effects on girls and women of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of exposure to these ideals remains unclear, and further research on more diverse samples of participants is plainly required.

Despite these limitations, our study is informative because it indicates that agentic, sexualized representations of women in the media are associated with equivalent levels of weight dissatisfaction as passive, objectifying images and are more strongly associated with self-objectification. The empowerment displayed in contemporary images remains rooted in women’s appearance and their conformity to cultural ideals of beauty and sexuality. Therefore, the sexual agency implied in these images represents a form of pseudo empowerment and does not, in fact, have an empowering impact on young women; rather it seems to be more damaging than passively objectifying representations. In sum, what on the face of it appears to be a positive step forward toward empowering women consumers of sexualized advertising actually appears to be a step backward.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.
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