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"It just sends the message that you're nothing but your body" a qualitative exploration of adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images on social media

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"It just Sends the Message that you're Nothing but your body" a Qualitative Exploration of Adolescent Girls' Perceptions of Sexualized Images on Social Media

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Abstract

This qualitative study used in-depth interviews to explore adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images they typically find when using social media. Twenty-four participants aged 14–17 years described sexualized images of females as normalized on social media. The interplay between gendered and social norms that endorsed and rewarded girls for posting sexualized images was seen to influence an expectation for girls to conform with their peers and post such images of themselves. They indicated sexualized images emphasize personal value on appearance and rejected this notion. However, participants also believed girls should be able to post sexualized images of themselves if they wanted to. There were tensions between whether girls' sharing of sexualized images of themselves on social media would be interpreted as a display of confidence (socially acceptable) or attention seeking (socially unacceptable). Findings provide guidance for the development of health promotion programs to reduce potential harm from social media use by adolescent girls.

Keywords Adolescence · Sexualization · Gender · Instagram · Social norms

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Introduction

The sexualization of adolescent girls on social media has raised concerns among the community and researchers alike (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015; Hartas, 2021; Perloff, 2014; Skowronski et al., 2021). The American Psychological Association (APA) (2007) taskforce investigating the impact of sexualization on young girls, defined sexualization as occurring when:

> A person's value comes only from his or her sex appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality being inappropriately imposed upon a person. (APA, 2007, p.1)

Adolescent girls' internalization of sexualization, that is, their belief of the importance of being sexually attractive, has been associated with mental health difficulties including increased depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and negative body image (McKenney & Bigler, 2014; Tolman et al., 2006). A prominent source in which adolescent girls are subjected to the sexualization of females, as described in the APA's definition, is within their use of social media. Images depicting girls and women as sexually available and objectified are ubiquitous and normalized on social media and emphasize a focus on sexual attractiveness and physical appearance (Bell et al., 2018; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Ward, 2016).

The use of social media is widespread among adolescents, with 63% of 13- to 18-year-olds in the United States reporting they use social media everyday (Rideout & Robb, 2019), and 85% have at least one social media account by the age of 14 years (Odgers & Robb, 2020). Of these adolescents, 70% of girls use social media every day compared to 56% of boys (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Similarly, in Australia 14- to 24-year-old females report they spend an average of almost two hours per day using social media and nearly five hours more per week than males of the same age (Roy Morgan, 2018). The high frequency in which adolescent girls use social media combined with the high prevalence of sexualized images of females on these platforms warrant further exploration of girls' perceptions of such images and how these might influence their mental health.

Sexualization on Social Media and Influences on Adolescent Girls' Mental Health

Previous research has documented the negative impact of sexualized images in traditional forms of media on adolescent girls' mental health, with exposure linked to depressive symptoms and negative body image (Bigler et al., 2019; Ward, 2016). A key difference between social media and traditional forms of media such as television, film and magazines is that they enable instant social interaction between users, with creating and sharing photos and videos central to this engagement (Madden et

al., 2013). As such, adolescent girls can be active participants in creating sexualized images of themselves on social media. For example, research found adolescent girls frequently post sexy self-presentations on social media platforms such as Instagram, defined as self-taken images where girls are scarcely dressed, have a sexy gaze or are posing in a sexually suggestive but not explicit way (van Oosten et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020). Additionally, females in images on social media are more commonly their peers compared to traditional forms of media where celebrities are the focus. Although images of celebrities are also prominent on social media, the importance and relatability of peers to girls' daily lives may mean viewing sexualized images of their female peers further emphasizes importance of sexual attractiveness and value based on appearance (Bigler et al., 2019; Perloff, 2014; Strahan et al., 2006). The unique interactive features of social media compared to traditional media that allow adolescent girls to create their own sexualized images and view those of their peers has led to increased research exploring the mechanisms in which exposure to sexualized images in social media may influence adolescent girls' mental health. Two mechanisms that may play a role in the relationship between sexualized images on social media and adolescent girls' mental health are that of self-objectification and social norms.

Self-objectification

Objectification Theory has been widely used to explore the impacts of sexualization on females' mental health and posits the pervasiveness of sexual objectification within society acculturates females to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of themselves and their bodies, labelled 'self-objectification' (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Self-objectification may be particularly prominent among adolescent girls, with adolescence being a time of increased self-awareness, self-consciousness, and preoccupation with image, as well as a time when identity is established (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). When girls view sexualized images while using social media, they may self-objectify as they observe and evaluate such images in this environment (Bigler et al., 2019). Research related to Objectification Theory demonstrated the mediating role of self-objectification on adolescent girls' mental health, with a recent systematic review of self-objectification research among girls under 18 years of age showing self-objectification is associated with depressive symptoms and disordered eating (Daniels et al., 2020). Additionally, the role of sexualized media in self-objectification has been established, with a meta-analysis finding sexualizing media use increases self-objectification, with stronger effects for online media use (measured as using the Internet or social media) compared to television (Karsay et al., 2018). While no age or gender differences were identified, the authors highlighted the need for more research with younger adolescents and acknowledged that while masculinity ideals for males are increasing in media, the sexualization of females remains ubiquitous in comparison (Karsay et al., 2018). The evidence suggests that girls' mental health may be impacted from exposure to sexualized images through social media use, compounded by self-objectification that such use enables.

There is a growing body of research investigating the relationship between adolescent girls' social media use, self-objectification, and their mental health, with a particular focus on body image. For example, in a longitudinal study of German adolescents aged between 13 and 19 years, frequency of viewing sexualized images on Instagram predicted self-objectification, (measured as valuing appearance over competence and engaging in body surveillance), and girls reported greater body image concerns compared to male participants (Skowronski et al., 2021). While not focused on sexualized images specifically, research has also explored the relationship between adolescent girls' and young women's 'selfie' (self-taken images) behaviors on social media, self-objectification, and negative body image and disordered eating (Cohen et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). A longitudinal study of Chinese adolescents found that viewing and editing selfies, but not posting selfies, was significantly associated with appearance concerns and that participants' selfie-posting was predicted by higher self-objectification (Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, a cross-sectional study of Australian young women found selfie activities on social media were associated with body image concerns and disordered eating, and self-objectification strengthened the relationship between how invested participants were in their selfies (extent to which they edited these images and their level of investment, effort and concern related to sharing selfies) and bulimia symptomology (Cohen et al., 2018). Self-objectification, therefore, may help to explain how sexualized images on social media influence adolescent girls' mental health. However, self-objectification is only one component of sexualization that may impact mental health, with the unique interactive features of social media likely contributing to social norms for girls in relation to sexualized images on this platform.

Social Norms

In line with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), social media may provide a particularly influential learning model for adolescent girls about acceptable social norms as they observe and learn from the behavior of peers and/or celebrities. The endorsement of sexualized images through features on social media such as 'likes' and comments can further encourage girls to learn from and adopt sexualized behavior online and influence their beliefs about how they are valued as a female in society. Research has found sexualized images are rewarded on social media, with a study of young women's self-sexualized images on Instagram finding such images received more likes than those that were less sexualized (Ramsey & Horan, 2018). Additionally, in a longitudinal study of Dutch adolescents, girls posted more sexy self-presentations, and viewed other users' sexy self-presentations, on social media more frequently than boys (van Oosten et al., 2017). Similarly, a study of Belgian adolescents found girls were significantly more likely to post sexualized images of themselves on Instagram compared to boys, with social norms among peers strongly associated with their intention to post such images (Van Ouytsel et al., 2020). Acceptance and approval by peers are of particular importance during adolescence (Strahan et al., 2006). Qualitative research has highlighted the challenges adolescent girls face in navigating self-presentation and impression management through the images they post of themselves on social media, wanting to gain peer acceptance through

appearing sexy but also being careful to avoid condemnation for appearing too sexually available (Mascheroni et al., 2015). Likewise, qualitative findings from research with adolescent girls and young women highlighted the social rules that determine how young females portray themselves on social media, with participants expressing negative attitudes toward those who posted sexualized images of themselves with a delicate line between what was deemed acceptable or unacceptable (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). A focus on the value of girls' physical appearance may therefore be exacerbated through their use of social media, as they engage with their own and others' sexualized images and witness the high level of acceptability and endorsement of these images, all while navigating complex social norms and rules related to sexualized ideals of femininity.

The influence of sexualized images on social media on adolescent girls' mental health is likely to involve an interplay between self-objectification and social norms, both which occur within broader sociocultural discourses related to the sexualization of females. Focus groups with adolescent girls have illuminated how girls discern sexiness from the negative alternative of appearing 'slutty', perceiving females who are confident in their sexiness in a positive light but only if they are respectable and authentic in their self-confidence, without going too far in their presentations of sexiness or purposely seeking male attention (Lamb et al., 2015; Ringrose et al., 2019). Girls also perceived other girls their age as knowing and resistant to the influence of the media in the way they dress and behave, but also thought they were passively receptive to such influence (Lamb et al., 2015). Similarly, focus groups with Dutch adolescent girls showed they had high levels of media knowledge in relation to unrealistic appearance ideals and while they did not feel influenced by such ideals themselves, they perceived other girls as susceptible to this (van Oosten, 2021). Girls also appeared to show little concern for the sexualization of women in society at large and despite their proclaimed media knowledge, demonstrated little awareness of sexual objectification or sexual double standards in the media (van Oosten, 2021). While these studies highlight the importance of considering how adolescent girls interact with peer and media processes within the broader context of the sexualization of females, research exploring the influence of these processes on mental health, and specifically related to the role of social media, remains scarce.

It is important to learn more about adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images on social media to help further our understanding of the mechanisms of how such images might influence their mental health (either positively or negatively) and therefore guide the development of health promotion programs addressing social media use and mental health among adolescent girls for prevention and early intervention that can minimize potential harms. Further, it is important to explicate the lived experiences of adolescent girls when exploring these complex topics (Lamb & Koven, 2019). This paper is part of a broader study exploring how sexualized images of females on social media might influence adolescent girls' mental health, in positive and/or negative ways. An important first step in the study was to understand what sexualization means to girls and whether they perceive the images of females they view in their use of social media as sexualized. Therefore, the findings presented in this paper answer the following research question: What are the perceptions of adolescent girls about sexualized images found on social media?

Method

This study, informed by Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), utilized a generic qualitative research design using one-on-one in-depth interviews to better understand how adolescent girls discern and interpret sexualized images typically found when using social media. A generic qualitative design, as described by Caelli et al., (2003), is not informed by any one known qualitative methodology and its explicit or established set of philosophical assumptions. A constructivist epistemological stance informed the study, a perspective that considers reality as a social construct, whereby individuals create their own unique realities and assign meaning to these (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2004).

Participants

The study comprised twenty-four purposively sampled adolescent girls aged 14–17 years (Grades 9–11) residing in (removed for peer-review). Adolescent girls (aged 14–17 years) commonly use a phone or tablet to engage with others and are frequent users of social media (Rideout & Robb, 2019), and therefore can provide insight into the pervasiveness and impacts of encountering sexualized images during social media interactions. Inclusion criteria required participants to be active users (i.e., one hour or more per day) of at least one social media platform (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook). To increase variation within the sample, participants were recruited from the Student Edge youth research panel (an Australian student membership organization) (n=13, 54.17%), non-government schools (n=6, 25%) and snowball sampling (n=5, 20.83%). This maximized participant diversity, particularly as Student Edge membership is extended to all students in the capital city metropolitan area.

Procedure

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee and the relevant non-government school sectors.

To recruit participants through Student Edge, eligible members (adolescent girls aged 14–17 years in the capital city of an Australian state) were emailed an explanation of the study together with a screening survey to confirm their suitability to participate. The screening survey, accessed via a link in the initial email, asked those interested in participating to confirm their age, gender, and social media use. The names and contact details of those who completed the screening survey (n=45) were collated by Student Edge and provided to the first author who then contacted adolescent girls to arrange interviews.

Non-government school student recruitment required school system and principal approval to distribute project information within schools through email, newsletter items and flyers. Parents and students were given an information and consent form explaining the research and contacted the first author via phone or email to register their interest. Each participating school had a staff member nominated to co-ordinate student interviews. Snowball sampling of participants also occurred, where study

participants were invited to distribute project information to others who met the inclusion criteria.

Written informed consent was obtained from both participating adolescent girls and their parent/guardian prior to or at the time of interviews. In-depth interviews were facilitated by the first author at a time and place convenient to the participant. Ten of the interviews were held face-to-face (at their school or a public location) and the remaining fourteen were completed via phone (by participant request). Questions were exploratory and sought participants' observations and perceptions of sexualized images typically found on social media, facilitated by using publicly available images from Instagram. The images were of celebrities who were among those with the largest number of Instagram followers at the time of data collection between 2016 and 2018 (Selena Gomez, Gigi Hadid, Kylie Jenner and Kendall Jenner), and were selected to include variation in the parts of the body shown and a sexually suggestive pose, as used in previous studies (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Kleemans et al., 2016). Participants were shown each image and asked to consider how girls their age would feel about themselves when viewing such images over Instagram and explore why (in both positive and negative ways) and what they think about the images and why. Participants were encouraged to use third person disclosures during interviews to enable discussion without having to reveal personal experiences that may potentially cause discomfort or distress. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from thirty minutes to one hour in duration.

Data Analysis

Interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were deidentified, with each participant and other identifying entity or institution being allocated a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Analysis involved the first author reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to identify patterns and contradictions within the text, generating initial codes and collating these into themes creating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. Inductive codes were generated both from within the data and a priori issues from the research literature on Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) to inform the coding frame (Creswell, 2007). Codes found not to represent the data accurately were modified to fit the data. Coding decisions were discussed by all three authors. A reflexive approach was adopted by the first author, acknowledging that her own biases and background influenced the collection and interpretation of the data. As a young woman in her late-twenties at the time, she recognized that although able to relate with participants' experiences, the influence of sexualized images on social media on their mental health may differ from her own.

The first author maintained an audit trail throughout data collection and analysis, documenting comments, decisions and observations made during data collection and analysis to demonstrate and clarify decision-making, ensuring interpretations were accurately reflected in the data. This documentation strengthens the dependability and confirmability of the research (Liamputtong, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All three authors discussed the coding decisions.

Results

Of the twenty-four participants, seven were 14, 16 or 17 years old, with three aged 15 years. Most participants attended a non-government school. One of the participants spoke English as a second language. Time spent using social media varied among participants from more than four hours to less than two hours per day on a weekday. Social media use of most participants increased to more than four hours per day on the weekend. Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat were the most commonly used social media platforms, predominantly accessed via mobile phone.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed girls' understanding of sexualization and the normalization of sexualized images of females on Instagram. Participants described an 'interplay between gendered and social norms', 'personal value based on appearance', 'tensions between confidence and attention seeking' in relation to sexualized images of females typically found in their use of social media. Participants also referred to the 'responsibility' placed on girls to protect themselves and prevent any risks associated with sharing such images.

Sexualization – as Understood by Girls

Both younger and older participants were aware of the sexualization of females (in society broadly and within social media) and were able to explain what sexualization meant to them. They discussed sexualization as including a focus on females' bodies and referred to examples of imagery where girls are portrayed in sexually suggestive poses;

> I think of posters for perfume. Always, the girls are posting like they've just had sex, basically. Or if the girl is posing in like a promiscuous kind of way. (Isla, 17 years)

to reinforcing gender inequality and sexual objectification;

> Women being treated as objects by men. It just makes them think that they're not equal to men and that they are only here for sex. (Julia, 14 years)

Three of the four images shown in interviews were perceived by participants as sexualized. These perceptions were shaped by the amount (or lack thereof) of clothing worn and hence more skin shown, and a sexually suggestive pose. The images perceived as sexualized included a selfie of Gigi Hadid wearing a robe, open to show her cleavage in a push up bra and midriff, while pouting her lips; a selfie of Kendall Jenner in a bedroom wearing a bikini, focused on her stomach and bikini bottoms in a sexually suggestive pose; and a photo of Kylie Jenner holding a dog while posing on a couch in underpants and a tight t-shirt while pouting her lips. The image not perceived by the participating girls as sexualized was of Selena Gomez, taken from the ground on an upward angle to focus on her body while leaning on a balcony. In the image she is wearing a mini skirt, thigh high boots and a partially backless top

exposing her skin. Her face is only partially visible in the image, showing her mouth mid-laugh.

The Normalization of Sexualized Images of Females on Instagram

Through participants' discussions about sexualized images of females on social media, and Instagram specifically, it became apparent that girls perceived such images as normalized on this platform. Girls described that they view sexualized images of females in their use of Instagram frequently and indicated that girls their age share sexualized photos of themselves regularly;

> I'd say they're [images shown in interview] pretty normal. They're nothing like too scandalous or out of the norm for these days of what people are posting. (Grace, 15 years)

Participants perceived that most girls would not be able to identify such images as sexualized or recognize the potential impacts to their wellbeing because of how normalized they are;

> I think people don't even pick up on it [sexualization of girls on social media]. It's not classed as, not sexist, but it's not classed as being harmful to someone's self-esteem, it's just a day-to-day thing. It is [really quite normal], no one sees it as a problem or anything like that. I guess a lot of girls post them [sexualized photos] and it's just like a regular thing to be scrolling through your feed and finding things like that of people my age. (Ava, 14 years)

Interplay Between Gendered and Social Norms

The normalization of sexualized images on social media was perceived by participants as exacerbating broader sociocultural gendered norms of how girls should behave. An interplay between the gendered and social norms that define acceptable and normal behaviour by girls on Instagram became evident in discussions, where the functions of 'liking' and commenting on photos were perceived to play a key role in exacerbating the impact of norms. Participants described how seeing other girls they knew endorsed and rewarded with 'likes' and comments when posting sexualized images of themselves contributed to how girls believed they should portray themselves similarly on Instagram;

> At 14, they'd be posting photos of themselves with full make up, short skirts, [cropped] t-shirts, high heels and all this, and trying really, really hard to be like 20, it's like, you're 14! That's why they do it, because they know they're gonna get more likes and that's really bad that that's what they have to do. They feel better because they've got more likes even though they had to put something

that's not necessarily the best, so I think society is already supporting girls doing that kind of thing. (Candice, 15 years)

When they [girls] see girls like that [those in the images shown in interview], they see all these guys posting like, "Oh, you're so beautiful," and they wanna have the same reaction. So, they'll do it as well. It's showing guys that it's okay to look at them like that, see those sexual images and not [them] as just people. (Amal, 15 years)

I think being exposed to sexualized content does have a real impact on young girls. My sister who posts those kind of photos [revealing images of herself] and gets all these comments, I keep telling her that just 'cause everyone else is doing it, you don't have to do it too but she won't really listen. (Abbey, 17 years)

Girls these days – they think what people want is images of themselves in a certain way and people interpret that way to be quite sexualized and that's why people – I have a lot of friends and they post a lot of pictures that I wouldn't – that I would say that people perceived as sexual to conform with the peer pressures of what you should be doing on social media. I think people just post those pictures to boost their self-confidence sometimes. (Lucy, 14 years)

While the quotes above illustrate the role of peers in contributing to girls' posting norms on Instagram, the role of female celebrities and the sexualized images they frequently post of themselves in influencing girls to post similar images was also apparent in participant discussions. Girls commented that many girls their age followed such accounts on Instagram. The sexualized images shared by celebrities were perceived to further reinforce to girls that they can receive more attention and validation by posting similar photos of themselves. Most participants did not think celebrities were good role models for girls, as described by Amelia (16 years):

I think they [girls] need some good role models instead of just Gigi (Gigi Hadid) and Kendall (Kendall Jenner), models like that. I guess they need people to look up to that stand up for something and stand up for human rights or social justice issues, and not focus on models and what they're doing and celebrities. I think they should focus on maybe more important issues, issues that are going on in the world. The girls won't even watch the news and rather scroll Gigi Hadid's Instagram.

Personal Value Based on Appearance

The normalization of sexualized images on social media was also discussed as reinforcing the message to girls that their value is based on their appearance, and that they will be viewed as such by others. However, most participants were aware of this and felt this should not be how girls are viewed;

It [the sexualization of females on Instagram] just sends the message that you're nothing but your body, so that's everything about you, that's the most important thing when really it's not. (Ava, 14 years)

Just because you're a girl doesn't mean you have to look a certain way. (Zoe, 16 years)

Unrealistic beauty and body standards is the worst thing. I don't really like having those high standards to measure up to, especially when I know they are pretty unrealistic. (Sophie, 17 years)

Nevertheless, comparisons made to others when viewing sexualized images typically found on social media were frequently discussed by participants. Comparisons were described as contributing to feelings of inadequacy and self-consciousness among girls;

I think in relation to the sexualization of females, girls feel like they're inadequate. They need to be like this person, skinny like this person, or perfect like this person, when in reality, it's not who they are. (Amelia, 16 years)
I know sometimes I'm going through Instagram, seeing all these girls with a lot of makeup and everything makes me feel more obliged, I suppose, to wear makeup and more self-conscious about myself. (Abbey, 17 years)
I think we view it [sexualized images of girls] quite a lot. It's sort of expectant in your mind that that's what other people look like, so that's what you should look like. (Gabrielle, 14 years)

Tension Between Confidence and Attention Seeking

Girls who shared sexualized photos of themselves on Instagram were considered by participants as confident, and they aspired to have the confidence to do this themselves;

They [other girls] must be very confident to post themselves on social media in that way. (Josephine, 14 years)
It's like you go through girls' Instagrams and they'll have a lot of photos kind of like that [images shown of celebrities posing provocatively], them posing, [and you think] "Oh, do I have to post stuff like that?" Me, personally, I probably wouldn't post something like that for different reasons. I'm not that confident to do it or because I feel like it's a bit too much but other girls, they don't really care, I guess. (Jasmine, 14 years)

Participants drew a fine line, however, between perceiving girls who posted sexualized photos of themselves as confident or as attention seeking. This distinction appeared to depend on the pose or the revealing nature of the photo;

I mean obviously it depends how you pose and how you're portraying yourself. But seeing someone in a bikini, I don't really think much of it. Say if I saw someone smiling in their bikini, "Oh, yeah, they're having a good time." but then seeing that [image shown of celebrity posing provocatively], I'm thinking "Well, she kind of wants something." (Tahlia, 16 years)

If you're doing it [posting a revealing photo of yourself on social media] to show that you're confident in your body, I reckon it's good, but it depends how explicit the photo is. Otherwise, if you're just doing it to get someone's attention, I feel like you can do it in so many different ways than using your body. (Jasmine, 14 years)

While many participants disapproved of girls using their bodies for attention, they also thought girls should be able to share photos of themselves in this way if they wanted to;

I'm all about, it's your body, do whatever you want. It belongs to you if you want to get that sort of attention. I personally would never do that, just because I don't want that attention, but if they want it, then go ahead. (Emma, 17 years)

Participants frequently discussed the double standards between girls and boys. They believed boys are rewarded for behavior that girls are negatively judged for including posting sexualized photos. They spoke about how girls are perceived as wanting attention and validation whereas boys are perceived as just having a good time;

It's like the term 'slut'. You can call a woman a slut but nobody calls a boy a slut. Women are more, I think, more sexualized than boys so if we post a photo, it's talked about for ages. Like one of those sexual photos. If a boy posts a photo shirtless, at the beach, it's like "oh cool". Everyone loves it, you're at the beach, having a great time. Keep doing it but it's the opposite for girls. Oh, you're wanting to get likes. (Rachel, 17 years)

Responsibility

Participants discussed the education and advice given to girls from adults and school in relation to potential risks and harms associated with viewing and/or sharing sexualized images on social media. It became apparent in these discussions that the responsibility for preventing any potential risks or harm was placed on girls, with a focus on telling girls what they should not do rather than providing harm minimization and coping strategies. Girls did not believe this was realistic advice, as described by Ava (14 years):

A lot of people say, "Be very careful of what you post online. Don't post revealing photos," and all that, but at the end of the day, I think teen [girls] will do what they want and they won't really take [it] in. No matter how many times

you say it, we're not gonna listen until something goes wrong, as bad as it sounds.

Some participants described education they had received in school about the sexualization of females in media more broadly as well as on social media but not all had experienced this. For those who had, the onus was again on girls to protect themselves to reduce any potential negative consequences;

> The other week, we were talking about that [sexualization on social media], like, how girls can sexualize themselves and they were just saying, "Be careful what you're doing." So, in school we do have an awareness about that. We were just talking about how people use their body in the wrong way online. (Madeleine, 14 years)

Some participants, also believed that the onus was on girls for any negative consequences experienced as a result of sharing sexualized photos on social media;

> And if they [girls] want to sexualise themselves, I guess that's their option, that they've chosen, and then they have to deal with the repercussions if it goes south. They're the ones that took the photo. And I feel like, if they didn't take the photo, it obviously wouldn't be out there. So, they have to take some feedback for it. (Emma, 17 years)

Participants perceived that girls' reputations were put at risk through the posting of sexualized images, particularly in the context of the large number of users who could view photos that were considered sexual in nature;

> On girls' [Instagram] stories, I've seen so many girls post really inappropriate things and I'm just wondering the amount of people that are seeing that. (Grace, 15 years)

Discussion

The present study explored adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images found on social media, as part of a broader study investigating how sexualized images on social media might influence adolescent girls' mental health. Findings from this study showed that adolescent girls perceived sexualized images of females on social media as normalized, reflecting an interplay between gendered and social norms of how girls should behave on social media and that such images promoted personal value based on appearance. There were tensions between what participants considered displays of confidence or attention seeking by girls who post sexualized images of themselves on social media. Participants' perceptions of sexualized images on social media could be explained by the process of self-objectification and the role of social norms. Finally,

the findings suggest adolescent girls perceive a level of personal responsibility to protect themselves and prevent any risks from viewing and posting sexualized images.

This study found that the participating adolescent girls' understanding of sexualization aligned with the APA's (2007) definition. Girls described sexualization as including a focus on females' physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, and the sexual objectification of females by males, perceiving sexualization as leading girls to think they are not equal to males and only valued for sex. Consistent with previous research, sexualized images of females were perceived by participants as normalized on social media (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Ward, 2016), specifically on Instagram (Bell et al., 2018). Participants discussed the high prevalence with which girls their age share sexualized images of themselves on Instagram, as has also been reported in previous research (van Oosten et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020). Participants didn't perceive that girls their age would be able to recognize such images as sexualized or that they could have potential negative impacts on their wellbeing. This may be explained through the normalization of girls regularly viewing sexualized images and the concomitant diminishing of perceived negative consequences (Bandura, 2001). This finding both aligns and contrasts with previous qualitative research where adolescent girls believed other girls were knowing and resistant to media influences about how females should behave, yet at the same time thought they were passively receptive (Lamb et al., 2015). Relatedly, although displaying limited awareness of sexual objectification in social media, adolescent girls have also said they felt they were not influenced by sexualized media messages and body ideals, but that other girls were (van Oosten, 2021). Taken together, the findings from the current study and previous research suggests girls may adopt a "third-person effect hypothesis" (van Oosten, 2021) where they perceive sexualized images on social media as having a negative influence on other girls, but not them, even though it was evident in their discussions they were negatively influenced by such images.

Self-objectification is posited as a potential mechanism through which sexualized images of females on social media might influence adolescent girls' mental health (Daniels et al., 2020; Karsay et al., 2018; Skowronski et al., 2021). As proposed by Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), self-objectification reflects females' internalization of an observer's perspective of themselves, where they are primarily valued for and judged on their appearance. Self-objectification was prominent among participant discussions in this study, with girls describing sexualized images of females on social media as reinforcing the message to girls that their value is based on their appearance, and that girls their age frequently compare themselves to such images. This finding suggests self-objectification is a prominent issue among adolescent girls when exploring the influence of sexualized images on social media. Participating girls also expressed their disapproval and rejection of the notion that girls' value is derived from their appearance. This finding contrasts with previous research that found adolescent girls showed little concern for the sexualization of women (van Oosten, 2021). The development of strategies from a young age to counteract self-objectification could encourage girls to critique and challenge the sexualized images they encounter while using social media and help to reject the notion that their value is derived from their appearance. It is also important to consider the social norms related to posting sexualized images on social media among girls' peers when

targeting self-objectification in interventions aimed at addressing social media use among adolescent girls, to normalize challenging and critiquing sexualized images (van Oosten, 2021).

An interplay between gendered and social norms was apparent in participant discussions, with the social media functions of liking and commenting exacerbating broader sociocultural norms that tell girls how they should behave. In line with previous research (Van Ouytsel et al., 2020), girls' posting of sexualized images of themselves on Instagram was viewed by participants as rewarded and endorsed by receiving many likes and comments, reinforcing to girls that posting similar images is an acceptable social norm that will be approved by their peers. This finding aligns with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), suggesting pressure among girls to conform to gendered and social norms on social media that reward sexualized behavior. The extent to which girls conform with or challenge such norms are important factors to consider when developing interventions aimed at this group. Female celebrities' sexualized images were also perceived to contribute to the gendered and social norms that further reinforced the message to girls that they can gain attention and validation by posting similar images of themselves.

Further, our study revealed the challenges girls face when they post a sexualized image of themselves on social media. Consistent with existing research (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016; Lamb et al., 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Ringrose et al., 2019), participants' discussions highlighted the complex social norms and rules girls navigate related to sexualized ideals of femininity, where tensions between perceiving girls who shared sexualized photos of themselves as confident (socially acceptable behavior) or attention seeking (socially unacceptable behavior) were apparent. Conflictingly, despite expressing disapproval of girls using their bodies for attention on social media, participants in this study believed girls should be able to share sexualized photos of themselves if they wanted to and were critical of double standards where they believed girls were negatively judged for posting sexualized photos in comparison to boys, who were rewarded for the same actions. Likewise, previous research with adolescents found that boys are perceived as having more freedom to display their bodies publicly compared to girls, who are more likely to be condemned for such behavior (Albury, 2015). These findings suggest a complex interplay between the standards of behavior adolescent girls hold each other to and a belief that girls should have autonomy over how they present themselves on social media without fear of negative judgement. Additionally, it seems possible that adolescent girls may feel conflicted between their awareness of the gendered and social norms on social media in relation to sexualized images and their ability and confidence to reject or challenge these notions to conform with their peers. The findings are also reflective of broader sociocultural discourses and debates related to the sexualization of females and sexual socialization of girls that the girls participating in this study have grown up with, where sexualization and feminine empowerment with a focus on personal choice and agency have permeated mainstream media and popular culture but where girls are also placed as passive victims of sexualization (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; van Oosten, 2021).

Consistent with previous research, risks related to girls' reputations from sharing sexualized photos on social media were of concern to participants in this study

(Albury, 2015). The wide audience enabled by social media with the potential for many to view girls' photos, particularly in relation to those shared on Instagram, was attributed to risks to reputation. Some participants in this study believed the onus was on girls for any negative consequences girls experienced from their sharing of sexualized photos on social media. The view that any negative consequences from sharing sexualized images were an individual responsibility may be reflective of the post-feminist era in which participants in this study have grown up, where collective action to challenge societal structures that influence the sexualization of females has been superseded by a focus on contemporary women's individual empowerment and choice (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Scharff, 2016).

The onus on individual responsibility for negative consequences associated with sharing sexualized images was further reinforced in participating girls' schools and by other adults in their lives where they had received education and advice that placed responsibility on girls to protect themselves. The girls in this study did not perceive this as realistic advice. Harm minimization and coping strategies are needed to support girls should they experience any negative outcomes related to sexualized image sharing. Such strategies could consider motivations among girls for sharing such images including the need for attention, validation, popularity and acceptance among their peers, their perceived pressure to conform with social norms (Rodgers et al., 2021; Yau & Reich, 2018), the influence of the broader sociocultural context of sexualization where girls' self-sexualization can be perceived as empowering and reflective of their confidence, and encouraging girls to use social media in a positive way rather than a focus on risks (van Oosten, 2021). Further research with adolescent girls is needed to determine whether such strategies are salient and helpful to this group and to co-develop with girls any interventions aimed at reducing harm.

The current study highlights the importance of learning more about adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images on social media to help further our understanding of the mechanisms of how such images might influence their mental health. Understanding the interplay between the gendered and social norms that adolescent girls encounter on social media where sexualized images are rewarded and place an expectation on girls to conform and behave this way themselves, and personal value based on appearance and self-objectification, can assist families, schools and youth mental health providers to support adolescent girls. There is a need for school-based and community-level interventions to better understand and provide support to adolescents spending time online. Such interventions could include capacity building for teachers to address gender representations in their classes to encourage students (both female and male) to think critically about and challenge gender portrayals and stereotypes in different forms of media, including social media. Additionally, capacity building for parents/caregivers could focus on enabling engagement in discussions with their daughters (and sons) about gender portrayals on social media and how to counteract stereotypes and challenge gendered and social norms.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the current study. First, despite not necessarily being able to apply their knowledge when using social media, girls in this study appeared to have high levels of knowledge in relation to gendered representations and the sexualization of females on social media. This may be due to slightly more participants being aged between 16 and 17 years, and as such they may have more years of experience using social media and being able to identify gender representations in the media, compared to younger participants in the study. Age and more years of experience using social media may have influenced the study participants' interest in issues relation to social media and thus their interest in participating in the study leading to a sampling bias. Additionally, participating girls in this study all used the same social media platform most frequently (Instagram), and thus their responses during interviews were only discussed in relation to this type of social media. Findings may differ among girls who use other social media platforms where there are differences in types of content.

The characteristics of the participating girls in this study must also be considered. Most participants were from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds, attended non-government and co-educational schools and were from English-speaking backgrounds. Findings may differ among girls from low socioeconomic areas, government and all girls' schools and diverse ethnic backgrounds.

It is also possible the use of one-on-one interviews with adolescent girls in this study may have elicited different responses than if focus groups had been used. Given the important influence of peers highlighted in this study, findings may differ when girls discuss their perceptions of sexualized images on social media with other girls who are a similar age.

Conclusion

Our research aimed to explore adolescent girls' perceptions of sexualized images found on social media. Overall, participants showed an understanding of sexualization and believed sexualized images of females were normalized on social media. They described how gendered and social norms contribute to the normalization of sexualized images on social media and an expectation for girls to conform and post sexualized images of themselves to gain approval and acceptance from their peers. Findings were at times contradictory, with girls' attempts to conform to norms reflecting tensions among participants in considering whether girls who posted sexualized images of themselves were displaying confidence or merely seeking attention. They also believed girls should be able to post sexualized images of themselves if they wanted to, despite expressing disapproval of this behaviour and that the onus be on girls if they experienced any negative consequences as a result. Sexualized images were seen to emphasize personal value based on appearance, with participants rejecting the notion that girls' value be derived from their appearance, yet they also appeared influenced by this. The findings highlight the complexities of how adolescent girls navigate and interpret the sexualization of females both on social media and

in society more broadly, and how they may be conflicted between their awareness of the impacts of sexualization and gendered and social norms and their ability and confidence to reject or challenge these notions to conform with their peers. When considering how sexualized images on social media might then influence adolescent girls' mental health, it is crucial to recognize the social norms and rules related to sexualized ideals of femininity within broader sociocultural discourses that influence how girls interpret and engage with such images and their self-efficacy in challenging these.

Availability of data and materials The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate Full ethical approval to conduct this research was obtained from the University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee and the relevant school authorities. Written informed consent was obtained from both parents or guardians and adolescent girls. For those recruited from the Student Edge youth research panel, parent or guardian consent was required for students under 15 years to be eligible to become a member.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

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