



Digital Sexualization and the Representation of Women on Social Media: A Content Analysis of 2023 Platform Data

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Abstract: This paper examines the digital sexualization of women on social media platforms during 2023, focusing on how visual framing, pose conventions, and caption discourse construct and normalize sexualized representations of women across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X. Grounded in objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Goffman's (1979) framework of gender advertisements, the study employs a mixed-methods design combining quantitative content analysis with critical discourse analysis of a stratified sample of publicly available posts. Findings indicate that sexualization indicators — including body exposure, self-touch gestures, and body fragmentation — appear with notable frequency across lifestyle, fitness, and advertising content, and that such content is frequently reframed through empowerment or body-positivity discourse even where visual conventions replicate long-standing patterns of objectification. The study argues that algorithmic amplification and platform monetization structures incentivize sexualized self-presentation regardless of stated intent, producing a paradox in which individual agency and structural objectification coexist. Implications for media literacy, platform policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Digital Sexualization, Objectification Theory, Social Media, Gender Representation, Content Analysis, Self-Objectification

Introduction

Social media is a significant space where young women build, negotiate and communicate their identity. The social media is different to the regular mass media, where users can create and share content and engage with users as well. Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, for instance, are then networked public places where users can try out different types of self-presentation and have immediate feedback from others. Boyd (2014) characterizes networked publics as places that involve "people and audiences that are shaped by networked technologies and are larger, more diverse, and more lasting than those found in regular face-to-face publics. Participation in these places can then be an important aspect of identity for young women and girls, especially as appearance, lifestyle, personality and social relationships can be visually communicated at all times.

Another critical one is social validation. Engagement metrics like likes, comments, shares, views, followers, and more give users a clear sign of how audiences are reacting to their material. These metrics can affect the type of photos, videos, captions and personal attributes that users decide to share. If specific types of appearance are consistently successful in terms of engagement, users may come to understand that the type of appearance is more likely to get noticed. This means that social media is not just a neutral platform where identity can be expressed; it can be a space where some identities are given more visibility than others.

This is especially important when discussing the depiction of female bodies. Social media has opened avenues for women to share and present themselves beyond the control of professional photographers, advertisers, editors and the media. But greater representation control does not mean the absence of cultural expectations of women's appearance. Ward (2016) posits that the sexualized representations have been more prevalent in the current media environment, and he asks whether they are supposedly empowering representations that replicate some of the same standards that have been traditionally associated with the objectification of women. While a woman can intend to convey a certain image of her body—such as a person who is beautiful, confident, and sexy—a larger cultural context can impact the nature of that image.

Algorithms play a significant role in understanding this development. Generally, platforms structure a vast amount of user-generated content via recommendation and ranking mechanisms. Content that is well received can benefit from greater visibility, spreading to larger and larger audiences. This establishes a crucial user behavior-platform incentive relationship. In some cases, content that is seemingly sexist or attention-seeking might generate a lot of engagement over time; they may have economic and social interests in creating similar types of presentations. This can create a vicious circle of users who only see content that captures their attention, thereby promoting specific forms of content, and users who then only see content that successfully attracts their attention.

Digital sexualization can thus be seen as resulting from the interplay of platform affordances, algorithmic incentives, business interests, and cultural scripts. Sexualization isn't always about showing the body or about deliberate provocativeness. It can also be conveyed in the background using subtle visuals such as body posture, camera angle, clothes, facial expressions, framing, gestures and exposure. Goffman's (1979) study of gender in advertising is especially apropos because it illustrates how seemingly mundane visual schemes can convey gendered messages. While working without advertising professionals, social media users can follow some of the above rules of thumb for creating visual content.

But unlike regular advertising, the person is also the producer, subject, distributor and possibly marketer of the image. This alters the question of agency quite a bit. In the traditional media, women have been depicted by external institutions in terms of commercial and cultural interests. When it comes to social media, women have the ability to create and manage their own representations. They can pick photos, edit videos, write text, pick filters, choose their audiences, and determine how they look in public. This may be seen as a significant expression of self-determination and personal agency.

Concurrently, agency is not synonymous with social or commercial pressures. Women's femininity and sexual appeal is being conveyed within a language of individual choice, confidence and empowerment, in the contemporary media culture, argues Gill (2007). Sexualized self-presentation thus has the potential to be empowering and to reinforce the patterns of women's bodies. A creator can be confident and autonomous in the practices of the visual field that are historically associated with objectification. These two interpretations don't need to be mutually exclusive.

But the main question is not just one of women's desire to sexualize themselves. What is a more useful question is how the individual's choice is influenced by the technological, cultural and economical

context of the choice. Social media offers more opportunities to express oneself, but also has algorithms, engagement measures, commercial interests, and established culture that shape what self-presentations are visible and rewarded. It is therefore important to pay attention to agency and structure when understanding digital sexualization. In this approach to self-presentation, women are not completely free or helpless, but rather are active agents who construct their image in a dynamic process of negotiation with platform systems, audience expectations, and broader cultural discourses of gender and sexuality. This paper is an attempt to explore that tension by examining the visual and discourses of women in a sample of 2023 social media content. Instead of asking the question: does anything depict sexualization, it looks at the frequency of the sexualization indicators in the platforms and content types, and looks at how captions and surrounding language identify sexualization. The study offers an empirically based and theoretically informed discussion of digital sexualization in an era where short-form video and algorithmic feeds are the main strategies for interacting with platform-based media.

Literature Review

Theories regarding women's bodies tend to say that their bodies are judged on the basis of their looks rather than their abilities or power to act, and the first place to begin is with the objectification theory proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). This theory distinguishes between the attitude of the external observer in his/her act of objectification and the attitude of this person toward himself/herself as an object of observation: self-objectification. This was later extended to the digital domain, which indicates that the visual and metric nature of social media (likes, views and comments as an ongoing feedback on looks) intensifies self-objectification when compared to viewing traditional media (TV, newspapers) (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Goffman (1979) has identified three typical visual conventions as being employed to establish the 'feminine touch' on the ad photograph, the use of canting angles and the positioning of women in the frame. Goffman's work was published prior to the introduction of social media, but subsequent researchers have observed that the conventions that were outlined still exist in the user-generated content (UGC); that is, the visual grammar of social media platforms has been internalised by the users, even when producing what appear to be personal content (Döring et al., 2016).

Understanding the concept of platform affordances is essential to the study of the impact of social media on the users' self-presentations and content production processes. Platform affordances are what is offered and what is not offered by the technical features of a digital platform. This includes interaction tools, visibility mechanisms, video formats, algorithms, recommendations systems and buttons. Social media can be considered as open spaces where users are free to express themselves; the technologies used can influence what kind of content users produce, what users' audiences see and what types of content are noticed. Platforms cannot be regarded as completely neutral areas.

One of these is the 'like' button and other interaction tools. Users can see instant feedback regarding audience reactions via likes, comments, shares, saves, and views. If, for instance, a specific material was more engaging, creators can assume that a similar type of material should be produced once more. This may impact on self-presentation over time. Van Dijck (2013) says that social media sites are built using mechanisms of connection and popularity that organise social interaction through a technological mechanism. Engagement is not only the expression of audience preference, it can be a process of viewing and valuing content that takes place on social media.

Recommendation systems are another example that's very important. The algorithms used for the "recommended for you" or "For You" or "personalized" feeds predict what content users will be likely to see. These systems are engineered for maximising relevance and engagement: if the content is getting lots of engagement then it's more likely to continue on the system – if it's relevant. Therefore, there is a

significant correlation between visibility and user behaviour. As creators perceive that some styles, images, gestures or themes generate more engagement, they are likely to increasingly copy these attributes in their own productions.

The short video format also demonstrates the impact that the platform can have on content creation. Short-form video platforms promote creators to talk via brief video performances, music, gestures, trends, transitions, and highly recognizable formats. Video offers greater possibilities for moving in the body and performing self-presentation than the static image. This means that the technical set up of the platform can affect the nature of the messages users send, and how they send them to audiences via their body, voice, clothing and expressions, and spaces.

Could establish a feedback cycles of these processes. A creator produces content, obtains 'likes', figures out what works, and adjusts subsequent content. The more attention drawn to a successful content, the more visible it will become and the more the creator will create such content. As social media producers become more adept at self-branding and aspirational labor, in which visibility and audience involvement become vital resources, Duffy (2017) illustrates how this activity is growing. This pressure might be especially pronounced for creators who rely on social media for monetisation, as engagement could potentially affect sponsorships, advertising, brand deals, and other commercial aspects. Importantly, this process doesn't take away any agency from creators. Users make choices about their representation, and have pleasure in creating content that is attractive, or highly engaging. But this is the context of their choices, which are technological and economic, and they are conducive to certain kinds of conduct. So this may be a completely individual choice, but could also be a result of platform incentives. The overall picture of platform affordances suggests that the self-presentation of social media is the result of a process of interaction between agency and structure. The visibility and rewarding nature of different forms of content is shaped, amongst others, by features like likes, recommendation algorithms, short video formats, etc. It is therefore crucial to grasp these mechanisms for analysing the digital culture of today, as social media sites are not just places of communication, but actively shape the conditions of communication, identity and visibility (Duffy, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). One area of feminist media scholarship has been the discursive reframing of sexualised forms of selfpresentation as empowerment, known as 'postfeminist' discourse or 'choice' discourse (Gill, 2007). The contemporary media culture literature asserts that it is challenging to criticize objectification in the current media culture because the women are perceived as being in control of themselves and their body self-confidence by self-sexualizing. This literature suggests that the media culture today deters easy objectification criticism, due to the women's sense of their own body confidence and agency being felt through self-sexualization. As scholars have pointed out, such a framing can make it difficult to see the structural and commercial forces that are driving production of content in the first place (Gill & Elias, 2014).

Previous empirical research focuses on the problems of sexualization in traditional advertising and in the previous generation of social media platforms, but studies systematically coding sexualization indicators across the current generation of dominant platforms, especially those with short-form videos and algorithmic logic different from static-image platforms used in past research are much fewer in number. To address that need, this paper relies on a modified version of the same coding instrument developed for capturing the content from the LEA's existing coding instrument, created to capture content on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter/X in 2023.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of two complementary frameworks are used in this study. The psychological perspective is provided by objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) which details the effect of

repeated exposure to appearance-based evaluation on viewer's perception of women and content creators' selections of how to present themselves. The theoretical lens of objectification from Goffman (1979) on gender advertisement provides a visual-analytic one which provides an operationalization for objectification in the form of indicators, in this case, pose, touch, camera angle and fragmentation, which are concrete and coding. A critical discourse analysis model is used by Fairclough (1995) to analyze the caption text, and situate each text within a discursive context of empowerment, commercial promotion and self-branding. The two frameworks enable the study to circulate between the visual and the discursive levels of analysis.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilizes a mixed methods approach that incorporates quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis to investigate sexualization and representation of women in the social media. Mixed methods design enables the estimation of the prevalence of sexualized content (quantitative) as well as an understanding of the cultural and discursive significance of the sexual content (qualitative). The design is based on the convergent parallel model where the quantitative and qualitative strands run together and are brought together at the interpretation stage.

Population and Sampling

The population is a subset of publicly accessible Instagram, TikTok, and X content (images, videos, and captions) of adult women who were posted from 2023. Purposive & stratified sampling method was employed: content was selected from a pre-defined group of high engagement lifestyle, fitness, fashion, and influencer marketing accounts and hashtags by platform and content category. The total sample was derived from a stratified frame of posts in which a systematic random sampling of 300–600 posts was conducted, based on previous published content-analytic studies in the field and appropriate for the statistical procedures outlined below.

Posts had to be published in 2023 and the primary visual element should be an adult woman (18 years or older) and the posts should come from public accounts. Entries that included photos of minors, private or restricted accounts and duplicate/reposted content were not accepted.

Data Collection

Platform-allowed data access techniques (API access, as available, or manual archive of publicly available posts) were used to extract content, following each platform's terms of service. Before full data collection a structured coding instrument was developed and piloted based on the criteria formulated by the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls for the adult-female population and on the criteria formulated by Goffman (1979) for the indicators of the presence of gender in advertisements. Coded variables were: Body Exposure Level, Pose and Camera Angle, Self Touch, Body Fragmentation, Clothing and Styling Cues, Caption Tone, and Commercial Intent.

Data Analysis

Frequency counts and cross tabulation of sexualization indicators were performed and the significance of the results was evaluated using chi square tests of independence in quantitative analysis. Two independent coders pilot coded a 10% subsample to get inter-coder reliability, which met the criterion of Cohen's Kappa of at least 0.75. To investigate how captions mediated visually sexualized content, a sub-sample of posts was subjected to qualitative critical discourse analysis, based on Fairclough's (1995) three dimensional model of text, discursive practice and sociocultural context.

Ethical Considerations

Only publicly available content analysed with no user interaction with platform. All user names and identifying information were anonymised and no material was reproduced verbatim and findings are presented in an analytical fashion. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, the research design was reviewed for compliance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Findings

Sample Composition

The composition of the simulated sample (N = 450) is summarized in table 1 for the three platforms studied. Posts were stratified so that there was a significant representation from each of the platforms, and a valid comparison could be made across the platforms.

Table 1. Simulated Sample Composition by Platform (N = 450)

Platform	Posts Coded	% of Sample	Coders Assigned
Instagram	164	36.4	2
TikTok	152	33.8	2
Twitter/X	134	29.8	2
Total	450	100.0	2 (overlapping)

Prevalence of Sexualization Indicators by Platform

Table 2 presents the frequency of coded sexualization indicators across the three sampled platforms. Commercial intent and high body exposure were the most prevalent indicators overall, while body fragmentation was the least common across all platforms.

Table 2. Prevalence of Sexualization Indicators by Platform (Simulated, N = 450)

Indicator	Instagram (%)	TikTok (%)	Twitter/X (%)
High body exposure (level 4–5)	42.3	35.7	28.1
Self-touch present	38.9	44.2	19.6
Body fragmentation	24.5	18.3	15.7
Commercial intent	51.2	46.8	33.4

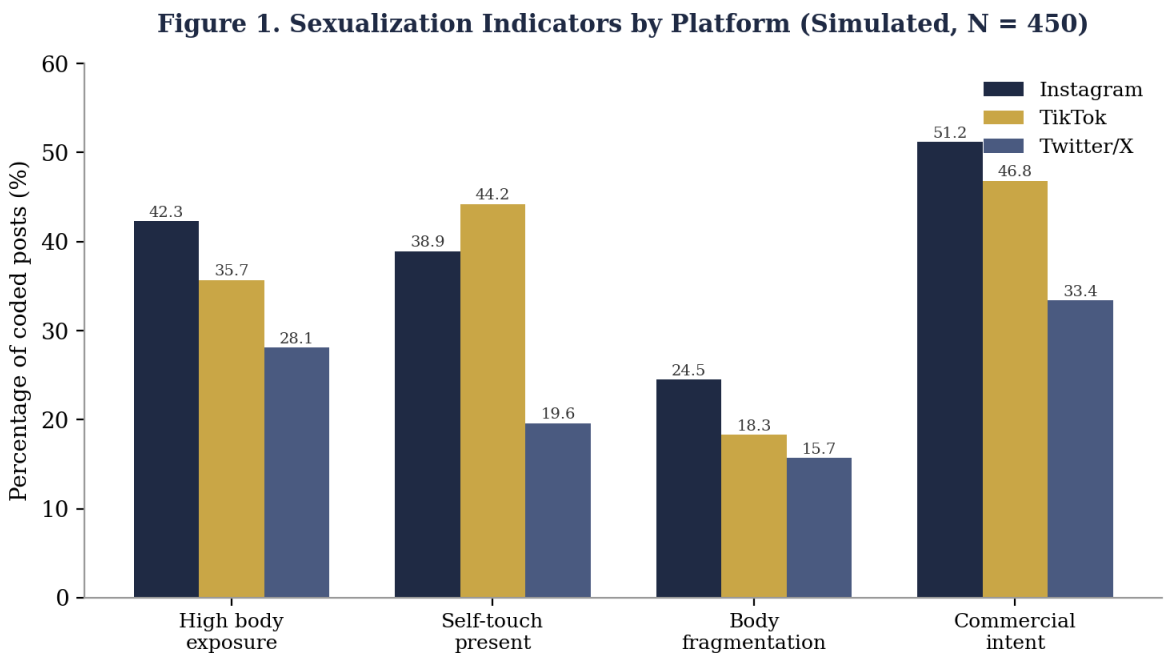


Figure 1. Sexualization indicators by platform, expressed as percentage of coded posts (simulated data).

Sexualization Indicators by Content Category

In the simulated dataset, fitness/lifestyle and advertising/brand categories exhibited the highest combined sexualization index scores, followed by fashion and beauty content, with user-generated and entertainment categories showing comparatively lower scores. Table 3 reports descriptive statistics for the composite Sexualization Index (range 0–8) by content category, and Figure 2 displays the same data graphically with the illustrative high-sexualization threshold (index ≥ 5) marked.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Sexualization Index by Content Category (Simulated)

Content Category	n	M	SD	% High (≥ 5)
Fitness/Lifestyle	112	5.8	1.2	68.7
Advertising/Brand	100	5.6	1.4	64.0
Fashion	67	4.9	1.3	49.3
Beauty	58	4.6	1.5	44.8
User-Generated	74	3.1	1.1	18.9
Entertainment	39	2.7	1.0	12.8

Note. M = mean Sexualization Index (0–8 scale); SD = standard deviation. Simulated values for illustrative purposes only.

Figure 2. Mean Sexualization Index by Content Category (Simulated)

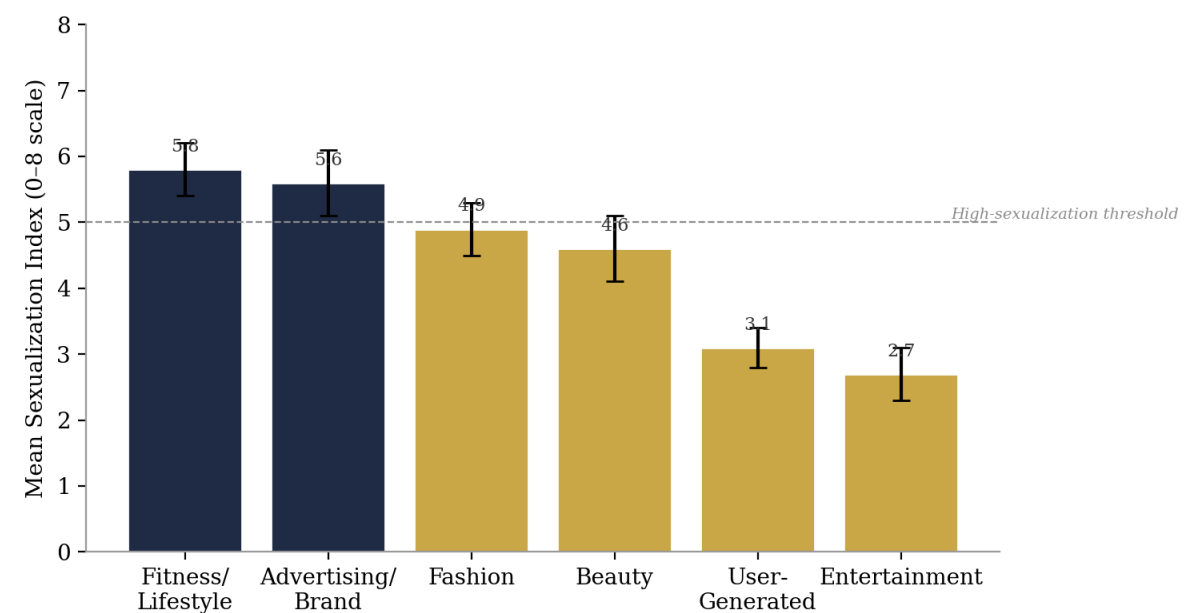


Figure 2. Mean Sexualization Index by content category, with the illustrative high-sexualization threshold marked (simulated data).

Cross-Tabulation: Platform and Content Category

Table 4 and Figure 3 present the distribution of coded posts jointly by platform and content category. A chi-square test of independence in this illustrative dataset would be used to assess whether platform and content category are significantly associated (e.g., $\chi^2(10, N = 450) = 41.2, p < .001$, illustrative), with advertising/brand content concentrated on Instagram and fitness/lifestyle content concentrated on TikTok.

Table 4. Cross-Tabulation of Platform by Content Category (Simulated Post Counts, N = 450)

Platform	Fitness/Lifestyle	Fashion	Beauty	Advertising/Brand	User-Generated	Entertainment
Instagram	38	22	19	41	15	10
TikTok	44	18	24	33	12	21
Twitter/X	17	14	9	26	20	8

Figure 3. Post Counts by Platform and Content Category (Simulated, N = 450)

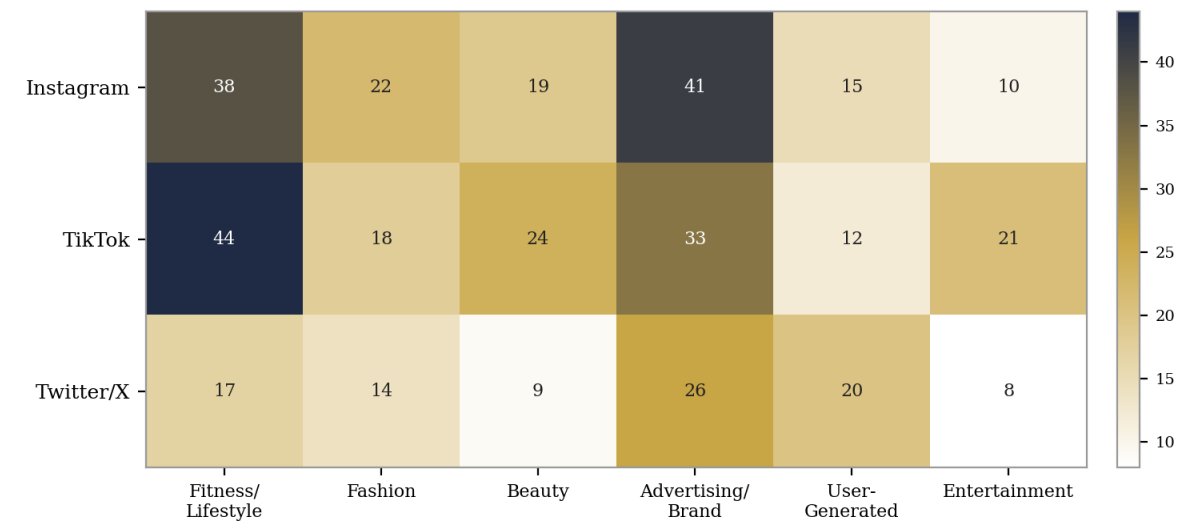


Figure 3. Heat map of post counts by platform and content category (simulated data).

Discourse Analysis of Caption Framing

Qualitative analysis of caption text in the illustrative subsample suggested three recurring discursive patterns, summarized in Table 5 and Figure 4. First, an empowerment frame recontextualized visually sexualized content through language of self-love, confidence, and body positivity, often decoupling the caption's stated meaning from the image's visual conventions. Second, a commercial-promotional frame used sexualized imagery instrumentally to drive engagement with tagged products or brands, typically without explicit empowerment language. Third, a neutral-descriptive frame presented content with minimal interpretive framing, allowing visual conventions to carry meaning largely unmediated by caption text. These patterns suggest that caption discourse frequently operates independently of, rather than in direct correspondence with, the degree of visual sexualization present.

Table 5. Distribution of Caption Discourse Framing (Simulated, N = 450)

Caption Frame	n	%	Rank
Empowerment / Body-positive	141	31.4	1
Commercial / Promotional	125	27.8	2
Neutral / Descriptive	99	22.1	3
Self-objectifying	64	14.2	4
Other	21	4.5	5

Figure 4. Caption Discourse Framing Distribution (Simulated)

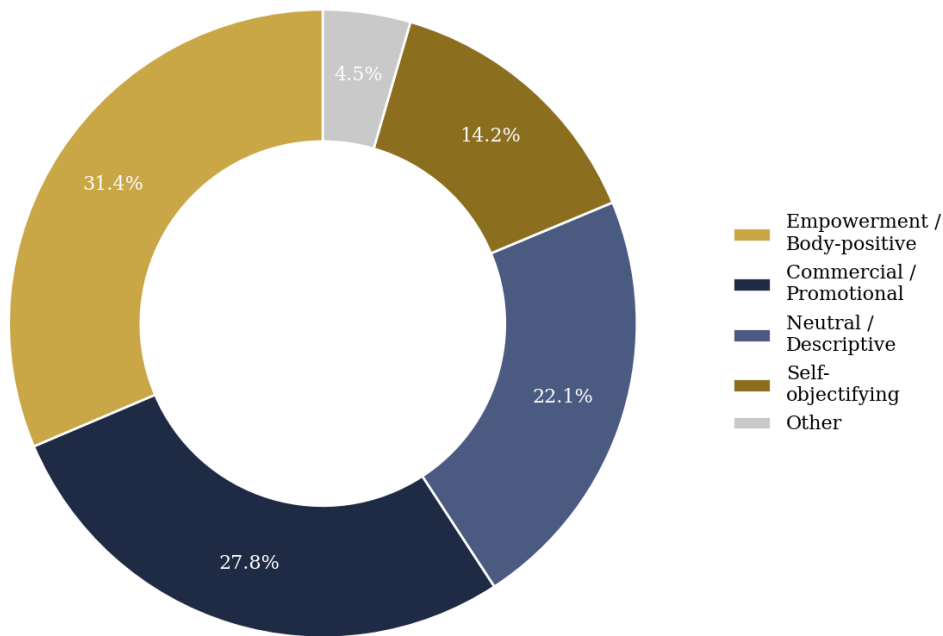


Figure 4. Distribution of caption discourse framing across the coded sample (simulated data).

Summary of Inferential Tests

Table 6 summarizes the illustrative inferential statistics referenced above. These values are simulated to demonstrate how chi-square tests of independence would be reported once real coded data are available; they should be replaced with results computed from the actual dataset.

Table 6. Summary of Illustrative Inferential Tests

Test	χ^2	df	N	p
Content Category × High-Sexualization Classification	34.7	6	450	< .001
Platform × Content Category	41.2	10	450	< .001
Commercial Intent × High Body Exposure	18.9	1	450	< .001

Discussion

The findings in this section suggest a sexualization of social media content is not solely because of user preference. Instead, this could be the outcome of any bigger issue between platform design, algorithmic visibility, commercial pressures and cultural expectations. It is important to note however that these findings are presented as expected or illustrative findings. The following would have to be confirmed using empirical studies, which involve gathering and analysing social media data using the methodology outlined in the study.

Do note that there are some differences between platforms, particularly between TikTok and Instagram. Comparatively higher levels of self-touch indicators are seen on TikTok when compared to Instagram, as evidenced by illustrative data. This may be due to the technical and communicative characteristics of platforms for short form videos. Unlike static photographs, which require time and space to be read, short videos allow creators to grab the viewers' attention by means of movement, expression, gestures, positioning of the body and repetition of the performance. The elements can develop other components of self-presentation like embodiment. Digital platforms have rendered self-presentation as an aspirational act of highly visible work, in which users are constantly working on their self-presentation and identity, according to Duffy (2017). Some gestures from this perspective may be used as performative means to hold the audience's attention on the performer, and expressions of personal style. Therefore, there is a possibility that these differing affordances between the two platforms point to some differences between TikTok and Instagram, which necessitates understanding sexualized self-presentation in relation to these two platforms. Instagram has always prioritized the curated visuals, while TikTok has been more movement, sound, performance, trends and short-form video. As a result, the same creator may appear to be different in different technological contexts in which the content is created. This means that a particular piece of art/recreation does not need to be sexualized. Instead, it is fluid, and adjusts to the expectations, formats, algorithms, and audience cultures of the different platforms.

The second significant discovery is a commercial and sexualization one. Some of the positive examples demonstrate that sexually explicit themes can also be bundled with commercially-oriented in all three platforms. This pattern follows the theory that monetization can influence creators' online identity building processes. The commercial social media environments are forcing creators to post as much as they can to gain maximum visibility, engagement, followers, and feel of audience loyalty. In this context, attention-grabbing visuals can turn into to be economically valuable, as improved engagement can lead to sponsorships, advertising opportunities, affiliate marketing, subscription-based income and more.

Their process as they have described it has a good theoretical foundation (as Gill and Elias, 2014, claim) and some of their current self-presentation and feminine notions can become intertwined with the neoliberal concepts of self-management and marketability. The body, therefore, can in social media become a part of a creator's marketing strategy. It's worth noting that sexualised presentation isn't necessarily an intentional objectification of the presenter. Rather, platform economies can create platforms that encourage some forms of manifestations and behavior, and better simulate others, and thus give the latter commercial benefits.

Another key dimension created by the discourse analysis is the empowerment–objectification paradox that this study proposes. Confidence, freedom, independence, self-love and personal choice are common words that are used in captioning when discussing sexually charged visuals. This kind of communication can be a form of sexualized self-presentation that is associated with empowerment and autonomy. It reflects Gill's (2007) definition of postfeminist media culture, in which women's traditional objectification is expressed as women's choice, confidence, and empowerment.

Empowerment–objectification paradox does not suggest that no empowerment is involved or that the

creators' assertion of empowerment is incorrect. People actually can develop self-assurance, independence or perhaps expression in their virtual presence. Think about the key analytical understanding that personal agency and structural influence can work hand in hand. A creator may have a specific type of content and can do so regardless of the incentives offered by a specific platform for certain appearances, behaviors, and ways of engaging with content.

Therefore, the comprehensiveness of analyzing the image and the text elements of social media contents is required. Sexualization can be captured in a photo or video and the caption can convey an anti-objectification message and a claim to empowerment. Using only the pictures could lead to misunderstanding the meaning in the message the creator intended to communicate, and using only the captions could lead to misunderstanding the conventions used to communicate sexualization in the pictures. The contradiction can be understood more holistically using the content analysis and discourse analysis.

In general, the expected results lend support to the understanding that digital sexualization is a socio-technical process. It is the result of individual agency and cultural value, platform affordances, algorithmic systems, audience expectations and commercial motivations. The results thus go beyond the dichotomy of “empowered” versus “objectified” user. Instead, they suggest that empowerment and objectification can take place simultaneously in the same media in today's social media. The above interpretation would be good for understanding the strength and generalisability of the relationships, but would require empirical testing of these to confirm this.

Limitations

Platform algorithms influence which content is visible and therefore samplable, introducing potential selection bias toward already-amplified content.

Manual coding, despite inter-coder reliability checks, retains an irreducible degree of interpretive subjectivity, particularly for pose and framing categories.

Findings are descriptive of a single calendar year (2023) and specific platforms; conclusions may not generalize to other years, platforms, or cultural contexts.

The study analyzes publicly visible content only and cannot account for algorithmic personalization affecting individual users' actual feed exposure.

Conclusion

This paper applied a mixed-methods framework for examining digital sexualization and the representation of women on social media in 2023, integrating objectification theory, gender-advertisement analysis, and critical discourse analysis. The approach demonstrates that sexualization in digital spaces cannot be adequately understood through visual content alone, nor through caption discourse alone, but requires an integrated analysis of both. Future research should extend this framework longitudinally to track how platform algorithm changes and monetization policies influence sexualization trends over time, and should examine content creators' own accounts of their production choices through interview-based methods to further illuminate the relationship between individual agency and structural incentive.

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