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Publication Date
2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Women's Self-Portrayals on Social Media

By

NEHA KUMARI
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Communication

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2022

Dedication

To Praveen, Shaurya, and my parents.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take a moment to thank those who have supported me in completing this dissertation. I owe a deep sense of gratitude to my advisor, Laramie. I have relied on your wisdom in more ways than you know. Thank you for letting my curiosity lead the way and for gently redirecting it when I wandered. You have nurtured my confidence by encouraging me to work independently. By means of humor, music, and candid banter, you have kept me going. You have made me a better thinker, writer, and researcher. I am deeply grateful for the patience and kindness you have shown me. Thank you for being my mentor and friend.

I would also like to express gratitude to my committee. Dr. Cho, thank you for your thoughtful feedback, guidance, and encouragement right from my first year in the program. Dr. Ruiz, thanks for your prompt responses, keen insights, and your reassurance and support in moments I needed it. My sincere thanks to Dr. Bo Feng and Dr. Ross Thompson for their guidance in developing this project during my qualifying exam. I would also like to express thanks to Supreet Mann for collaborating as a coder for my content analysis. Special thanks to Dr. Drew Cingel for media lab sessions, those meetings have been helpful in shaping my approach to research.

I am deeply indebted to the Department of Communication and UC, Davis for these years of excellent education and academic and financial support. My sincere thanks to all faculty members for their mentorship and guidance. I would also like to acknowledge Stephanie and the administrative support team for their help.

I met some wonderful people in this program. Cheers to my cohort! Good luck to everyone in the media lab, I am so proud of each one of you! Special thanks to my friends Thais, Jannath, Irena, Supreet, and Michael for bringing me joy and camaraderie. I will miss you all.

Thanks to all my loved ones back home – my grandma, parents-in-law, uncles, aunts, cousins, and to all my friends for their support. Special thanks to my siblings, Gurmeet and Anamika, for their wisdom and humor; you two are my pride. I would also like to express my deepest love and gratitude for my late grandfather, a brilliant man to whom I owe all my confidence.

To my parents, I am deeply indebted to you for your selfless love. In moments of self-doubt, you two have shown unconditional faith in my abilities. Thank you for instilling in me a profound reverence for education. Everything I am, I owe to you two.

Most of all, I am grateful to my husband Praveen and our son, Shaurya. Praveen, you inspire all my ambitions. There is no way I would be here, doing this, without you. No matter how tough it got, as it did at times, you always came through. We did this, together. For your love, your unfailing ability to make me laugh, and for all that you do for our family, thank you. Shaurya, my angel, you make me so incredibly happy. For your tight hugs, I am eternally grateful. You two are my rock.

Abstract

The objective of this dissertation was to examine how women use social media for self-portrayal and whether adherence to gendered norms of physical attractiveness and message assertiveness influence the evaluations of these portrayals. Three studies were conducted. In the first experiment, women's physical attractiveness was found to affect their persuasiveness through likeability and perceived competence; benevolent sexism moderated this mediation. In the second experiment, women's physical attractiveness was found to influence reader's sexism indirectly and negatively, through perceived competence. Assertiveness interacted with attractiveness to influence gender related collective self-esteem for female participants. The third study was a content analysis examining portrayals of pregnancy on Instagram. This study concluded that pregnancy representations on social media are not realistic; they were found to be overly positive, highly commercialized, and endorsing normative beauty ideals. Overall, all three studies found self-portrayals of women on social media to be informed and influenced by gender normative expectations.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Chapter 1

Introduction

Women's portrayal in media reflects their social status. Feminist media scholars and other researchers have examined portrayals of women in media such as film and television (across genres such as fantasy, action, horror), magazines, and advertising. The portrayals of women in traditional media have been stereotypical and sexualized. For example, media have been found to portray women in traditional or domestic roles and roles of low power and authority (Tuchman, 1978). Media also put emphasis on a woman's physical appearance over other aspects of her being. Feminine beauty is a pervasive theme in media's depiction of women and media exposure to such beauty ideals starts from a young age. For example, children's fairy tales have recurring references to female beauty (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). One especially problematic aspect of this preoccupation with female beauty is media's obsession with thin-body ideals. Depictions of beauty standards in television and magazines for women have been found to be slimmer than for men and slimmer than it has been in the past (i.e., 1930s) (Silverstein et al., 1986). For example, there has been a gradual trend toward slimness in *Playboy* models (Seifert, 2005). Additionally, besides putting an emphasis on beauty, media also sexualizes and objectifies women. Both traditional and new media have been found to portray women as sexual objects (Ward, 1995; Davis, 2018).

Such media depictions affect women's attitudes and well-being. For example, meta-analytical evidence supports that, for women, exposure to thin-body ideals in mass media is linked to body image concerns (Grabe et al., 2008), at least in women with pre-existing body dissatisfaction (Ferguson, 2013). Women exposed to media containing sexual stereotypes have

been found to endorse those specific stereotypes more than women exposed to nonsexual content (Ward, 2002).

Social media hold the promise to counter such problematic depictions of women in mainstream media. One probable reason for traditional media's limited view of women could be its male-dominated production. By empowering women to portray themselves, social media has, to some extent, made media more accessible to all women. Recently, media have played a crucial role in putting the spotlight on women's issues. Social media hashtags such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have highlighted women's shared experiences of sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. This shows that social media have the potential to empower women. Thus, women could be using social media to compensate for the limited portrayals they receive in mainstream media. This dissertation explores this notion and examines whether women are creating an empowering narrative on social media that challenges stereotypes and gendered expectations and whether gendered expectations of beauty and tentative behavior influence the evaluations of such online self-portrayals.

In these studies, I explore recurring themes in women's self-portrayals on social media and the attributes that affect evaluations of these online portrayals. As per social norms, women must demonstrate femininity through their physical appearance and subservient conduct. This dissertation examines whether social media's portrayal of women conform to such ideals or challenge them. It also examines the effects of any nonconformity on a variety of outcomes like women's persuasive power, well-being, and participants' sexism. I also explore the themes of beauty ideals in women's online self-portrayals in a specific subgroup i.e., pregnant women. Ideally, it would be expected that pregnant women be exempt from the stringent requirements of societal beauty ideals. As a pregnant woman's body is carrying out a crucial biological function,

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women might be expected to be lenient in their adherence to body and beauty ideals in portraying their pregnant bodies. I explore such beauty related and other central themes in social media's narrative of pregnancy.

Another gender typical expectation for women is to not behave in a direct, assertive manner. Norms dictate that women behave communally and speak tentatively. Assertiveness is considered a masculine trait (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Feingold, 1994). Compared to men, women have been found to self-report as being less assertive (Feingold, 1994) and assertiveness in women has been found to be negatively evaluated (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This dissertation explores the effects of deviating from normative expectations of being tentative on evaluations of women's self-portrayals online.

I explore reactions to women's assertiveness and attractiveness in the context of both gender-neutral and feminist topics. Women's likeability and perceived competence are examined as possible mediators through which assertiveness and attractiveness affect outcome variables such as persuasiveness, sexism, and collective self-esteem. I also examine the moderating role of sexism in determining the effects of attributes such as physical attractiveness and linguistic assertiveness on women's power to influence as well as their well-being. Normative gender role expectations require women to look attractive and feminine and speak tentatively. Since the degree to which people judge women for their adherence to such ideals would be influenced by their degree of sexist beliefs, it is likely that sexism will moderate the effects of these attributes on women's evaluations. As sexist beliefs can manifest in different forms, I explore the moderating role of two different forms of sexism, namely hostile and benevolent sexism. In exploring the role of two different manifestations of sexist beliefs, this dissertation acknowledges the need to identify the differences in their effects.

Organization

Three studies were conducted in this dissertation. The primary objective of these studies was to explore women's self-portrayal using social media. The dissertation has been organized into five chapters. This first chapter provides a broad framework within which the three studies were conducted. It discusses the relevant literature and briefly summarizes each study. The second, third, and fourth chapters discuss each study in detail. The final chapter is a general discussion on common themes in this dissertation's findings and provides recommendations for future research.

Preview of Studies

Attending to women's self-presentation in social media is ultimately concerned with the question of effects—how do alternative self-representations by women influence the way viewers see the message sender, the message, and themselves as a consequence? In the following studies, I use two experiments to examine whether attributes conveying women's femininity, such as physical beauty and tentative language use, affect how viewers perceive the woman on traits such as competence and likeability and if assessments on these traits mediate the persuasiveness of the message. I also examine whether participant's sexism and collective self-esteem are affected by these two traits. Aside from these effects of women's self-presentations, the dissertation also examines the main themes in women's actual online self-portrayals through a content analysis of a subgroup of women i.e., pregnant women.

Study 1 (Examining the Effects of Attractiveness and Assertiveness on Women's Persuasive Power on Social Media) **and** *Study 2 (Evaluation of Feminist Messages on Social Media)*

Physical Attractiveness. Attractiveness has been described as an informational cue and as "the most visible and most easily accessible trait of a person" (Patzer, 1985, p.1). It has been

found to influence judgements about attributes such as social desirability (Dion et al., 1972), social, and intellectual competence (Eagly et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1995), and persuasiveness (Chaiken, 1979). Meta-analyses have partially supported these halo effects of attractiveness (Eagly et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1995). For women, social norms put an emphasis on physical attractiveness. For example, women have been found to be more concerned and less satisfied with their appearance than men (Jackson et al., 1987). The first two studies examined the role of adhering to these expectations of attractiveness on persuasiveness, sexism, and other outcomes through likeability and perceived competence. The two studies explored two different kinds of topics. They also examined the moderating role of sexism on these effects of beauty on persuasion.

Message Assertiveness. Assertiveness was operationalized in these studies as linguistic assertiveness using elements such as disclaimers and tag questions (Carli, 1990). As assertiveness is seen as a masculine attribute, women are often negatively evaluated for displaying assertive behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). The first two studies examined the effect of women using assertive language in their portrayal of different issues online. These studies explored the effect of assertiveness on women's persuasiveness, sexism, and other outcomes through likeability and perceived competence. It also examined the moderating role of sexism on these effects.

Persuasiveness. Persuasiveness of online messages examined in the first two studies of this dissertation is grounded in Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This model expects cues such as source attractiveness and message assertiveness to influence persuasive processes when motivation for message processing is low (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As social media is a fast-paced media environment with distractions, I expect these cues to influence persuasion.

Likeability and Perceived Competence. Since women's assertiveness and attractiveness have been shown to influence their likeability and perceived competence and these two factors affect persuasiveness, it was hypothesized that women's evaluation on these two attributes would mediate the expected effects.

Sexism. Both studies use sexism as a moderator. More specifically, benevolent sexism is expected to moderate the effects of the two independent variables on the two mediators, namely likeability and perceived competence. The second study, as it focuses on feminist topics, also measured sexism as an outcome.

Behavioral Intention. In the second study, participants' intentions to socially endorse the messages was measured to assess whether the independent variables had the potential to influence online behaviors on social media.

Collective Self-Esteem. Women's exposure to feminist messages has effects on their well-being. The second study explored the effect of assertiveness and attractiveness in advocating feminist issues on female participant's collective self-esteem, related to their gender group.

Study 1. The main objective of Study 1 was to examine the role of women's physical attractiveness and message assertiveness on their persuasive power through likeability and perceived competence. In an experiment employing a 2 x 2 factorial design, attractiveness and assertiveness were manipulated. Participants read fictitious social media posts on gender neutral topics. Content of the post was manipulated to achieve two different levels of linguistic assertiveness (assertive vs. tentative). The post was accompanied with a picture of the putative female author. This picture was used to manipulate attractiveness levels (highly attractive vs. less attractive). Persuasiveness was measured as the dependent variable, likeability and perceived

competence were hypothesized to mediate the effects on persuasiveness. Sexism was hypothesized to moderate these effects.

Study 2. The goal for Study 2 was to examine evaluation of feminist messages on social media. It used a 2 x 2 factorial design to examine the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on women's persuasiveness, reader's sexism, collective self-esteem, and intended online behaviors. It examined likeability and perceived competence as mediators and benevolent sexism as a moderator. Participants read faux social media posts about feminist issues. The content of the post was used to provide some general knowledge of the issue and to manipulate assertiveness (assertive vs. tentative). Putative author's photo was used to manipulate attractiveness (highly attractive vs. less attractive). Several outcome variables such as persuasiveness, behavioral intention, sexism, and collective self-esteem were measured.

Study 3 (*Pregnancy Portrayals on Instagram)*

Understanding the possible effects of women's self-representation on social media is meaningless without understanding how women actually represent themselves. I therefore undertook to describe patterns of self-representation for a specific subset of women in social media—pregnant women on Instagram.

The objective for this study was to examine pregnancy content on Instagram. In a content analysis, top hashtags were identified. These top hashtags were used to find Instagram posts related to pregnancy. Two coders then analyzed this content to explore the general characteristics of pregnancy content on Instagram and the nature of weight portrayal in these narratives.

For each post, the image, its caption, other hashtags, and the first comment on the post were coded. Using a pilot sample, a detailed coding scheme was developed by the two coders to identify recurring themes. Coded variables included items such as promotional content, image

content, portrayal of the pregnant belly, sexual suggestiveness, pregnancy-related challenges, references to pregnancy practices (such as types of deliveries, breastfeeding, etc.), physical appearance, fashion, health, fitness, and weight. Objectification theory was used to discuss the possible impact of these portrayals of pregnant bodies with regards to beauty ideals and expectations. Implications for women who use such social media portrayals for information, entertainment, or support were discussed.

This content analysis was used to understand the ways in which women choose to represent themselves on social media and whether the narratives created on social media challenged the limited representation of pregnancy in traditional media. Life events such as pregnancy mark a transition in many women's lives. It can be physically and mentally stressful and challenging. This should allow women to be offered some leniency with regards to gender normative expectations such as beauty or body ideals. Social media, owing to its decentralized media production, offers women an outlet to share more liberated narratives around pregnancy. This study examined how women are using social media as a tool to discuss their experiences of pregnancy and portray their pregnant bodies.

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Chapter 2. Examining the Effects of Attractiveness and Assertiveness on Women's Persuasive

Power on Social Media

Abstract

Social media is increasingly being used to discuss women's issues. Often, these messages

advocating women's rights are authored and shared by women. The present study examined how

perceptions of women's likeability, competence, and persuasiveness are influenced by their

physical attractiveness and assertiveness of their message on social media. Possible moderating

role of sexist attitudes was also explored. In a controlled online experiment, attractiveness was

manipulated using women's photographs and assertiveness was manipulated using linguistic

power markers such as disclaimers and tag questions. Participants ($n = 247$) included adults

recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing service. Results

indicated that attractiveness influences reader's perceptions of likeability and perceived

competence of the message author and persuasiveness of the message. This effect was moderated

by benevolent sexism. Assertiveness was not found to have any effect on the study outcomes.

Implications of subscribing to normative beauty ideals and ambivalent sexist attitudes were

discussed.

Keywords: persuasion, attractiveness, assertiveness, gender, sexism

Chapter 2

Examining the Effects of Attractiveness and Assertiveness on Women's Persuasive Power

on Social Media

Recent years have seen social media emerge as an influential space for stimulating and sustaining discussions about women's rights and well-being. Hashtags such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #equalpay have been used to build unified narratives that reflect, ridicule, or reject unfair treatment of women. Expectedly, these online narratives are predominantly authored and shared by women. As these messages attempt to challenge the status quo, often, they are assertive in nature. However, assertiveness can be a risky trait for women. Past research shows that assertiveness is considered a masculine trait (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Twenge, 1997; Feingold, 1994) and that when women assert themselves, they are penalized. Assertive women have been shown to be perceived as less likeable (Lao et al., 1975; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985; Rudman, 1998; Juodvalkis et al., 2003), less intelligent (Lao et al., 1975), and more hostile and less rational (Heilman et al., 1995). This presents a dilemma for feminist activism online as some level of assertiveness may be required to get public attention and motivate change, but to be liked less or be perceived as less rational or intelligent, as a consequence of being assertive, is likely to threaten the persuasive power of these messages.

The role that digital activism plays today as a mobilizing agent necessitates that we explore how these messages, that often require assertiveness, are evaluated. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine how such assertiveness in women's social media messages affects their persuasive power. I considered the possible mediational role of likeability and perceived competence, given that being assertive harms women's assessment in these domains. I also consider the effect of women's physical attractiveness on the evaluation of their messages.

Although physical attractiveness, as a general trait, tends to influence message evaluation, the premium that society places on physical appearance of women specifically (Wolf, 2002; Bailey et al., 2013) also makes it a contributing factor worth exploring.

Reactions to these gendered norms of assertiveness and physical beauty, as well as consequences of violating them, are likely to vary depending on one's gender role attitudes. Such attitudes determine the extent and manner in which female assertion or beauty is tolerated or incentivized respectively, thereby affecting the degree to which one is receptive to and accepting of the advocated message. It is likely that those with sexist attitudes would penalize women who assert themselves and reward adherence to norms of feminine beauty. Consequently, this study also explores if sexism moderates the postulated effects of assertiveness and attractiveness.

Literature Review

Physical attractiveness is a desirable attribute. Attractive people are often perceived to possess qualities that are not inherently a consequence of being beautiful. The notion of "what is beautiful is good" (Dion et al., 1972) imbibes the essence of what these beauty stereotypes generally imply. This general tendency of positive trait attribution to attractive people has been supported in narrative literature reviews (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Meta-analyses have shown stronger support for positive evaluations on specific traits such as social and intellectual competence than others such as integrity or concern for others (Eagly et al., 1991), attractiveness effects to be moderate in strength and variable across studies (Eagly et al., 1991), and effects to be stronger when explicit information about the specific trait was absent (Jackson et al., 1995). Review of experimental research has found that attractive people were thought to be more sociable, dominant, intelligent, and mentally healthy while correlational

studies have found these associations between attractiveness and personality traits to be trivial (Feingold, 1992).

Despite some variability in the findings discussed above, there is consistent support that attractiveness has a positive effect on likeability and perceived competence. Attractive people of both sexes have been found to be more likeable (Berscheid et al., 1971; Byrne et al., 1968; Walster et al., 1966). Reinhard et al. (2006) found support that in absence of other indicators of source likeability, attractive sources were found to be more likeable than less attractive ones. Another study found that women were liked most when they were attractive and made positive evaluations (Sigall & Aronson, 1969). Horai et al. (1974) found that attractive male sources were liked more than less attractive male sources. Eagly and Chaiken (1975) found that attractive communicators were more persuasive than less attractive communicators when advocating an undesirable position and interpreted these results based on likeability of attractive sources. Cash et al. (1975) found physically attractive counselors to be perceived as more likeable, intelligent, competent, and assertive than their less attractive counterparts.

Apart from being liked more, attractive people have also been found to be evaluated as more competent (Jackson et al., 1995). Attractive people have been found to be perceived as more competent, decisive, informed, and logical (Dipboye et al., 1977). In a meta-analytical review, Eagly et al. (1991) found that attractive people were perceived to have more social and intellectual competence than less attractive people. Another meta-analysis corroborated these findings and noted that these effects were even stronger when explicit information about competence was absent (Jackson et al., 1995). These findings indicate that attractiveness has a potential effect on likeability and perceived competence. Therefore, I hypothesized that:

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H1: When evaluating female authors of social media messages, readers will perceive highly attractive authors as a) more likeable and b) more competent than less attractive authors.

These effects of physical attractiveness on person perception could potentially impact persuasion, source physical attractiveness being a cue in the communication process. There is evidence that attractive communicators of both sexes are more persuasive and induce greater opinion change (Mills & Aronson, 1965) and opinion agreement (Mills & Harvey, 1972; Horai et al., 1974) than less attractive sources. Attractive salespeople were found to generate more positive attitudes and greater purchase intention than those less attractive (Reinhard et al., 2006; Ahearne et al., 1999). Chaiken (1979) found attractive male and female communicators to be more persuasive than their less attractive counterparts. A review of experimental studies in advertising on product perception and opinion change concluded that physically attractive communicators had more persuasive power, albeit limited by the context of the study and whether other cue information (such as expertise and persuasive intent) was present (Joseph, 1982). These findings indicate that high attractiveness has some potential to positively influence evaluation of persuasive messages. Therefore, I hypothesized that:

H2: Readers will be more persuaded by messages putatively authored by highly attractive women than by messages putatively authored by women who are less attractive.

Besides communicator's attractiveness, message assertiveness has also been found to be associated with persuasion. Assertiveness can be exerted through various behavioral and linguistic elements. Assertive language makes speech more powerful. Researchers have investigated the association between assertiveness and persuasion, with links to evaluation of competence, credibility, and gendered variability in liking (Carli, 1990; Carli, 2001; Bradac et al., 1981). Use of tentative or powerless language has been shown to reduce perceptions of

speaker credibility and message quality (Hosman & Siltanen, 2011) and persuasiveness (Sparks & Areni, 2002). Therefore, assertiveness has been shown to be an asset in persuasive endeavors.

However, such expected outcomes of assertiveness do not hold for women. Assertiveness is considered a typically masculine trait (Hess et al., 1980; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Twenge, 1997; Feingold, 1994). A review of the literature indicated that men reported to be more assertive than women in voicing their opinion (Hollandsworth & Wall, 1977). A meta-analysis on personality-related gender differences found similar support for men being more assertive than women (Feingold, 1994). Men are expected to be more assertive than women, score higher on assertive personality measures (Weisberg et al., 2011; Feingold, 1994) and report to be more assertive than women (Kimble et al., 1984; Hollandsworth & Wall, 1977). This makes assertiveness an expected and accepted quality when possessed by men and an unexpected and atypical quality when possessed by women. Given these gendered expectations and behavioral norms, assertiveness has been found to be evaluated differently based on gender. It is evaluated negatively when enacted by women, as such behavior clashes with the descriptive (how women typically are) and prescriptive (how women should or should not be) gender roles assigned to women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Assertive behavior is shown to be a desirable trait for men but an undesirable trait for women (Broverman et al., 1970; Rosenkrantz et al., 1968).

One such specific form of assertive behavior is the use of assertive language. Researchers have examined how assertive versus tentative linguistic styles impact evaluation of women and their power to influence. Lakoff (1973) examined the use of tentativeness in women's language and highlighted the censorship of strong affirmative language. Reid et al. (2009) found that men were more influenced by women who used tentative language when their gender identity was

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made salient and by women who used assertive language when their educational identity was made salient. Carli (1990) found that women were more influential with men when they spoke tentatively but less influential with women. These negative evaluations of assertive language use by women may affect their persuasiveness. So, I predicted:

H3: When reading messages putatively authored by women, readers will be less persuaded by messages that use assertive language than by similar messages that use tentative language.

Such a relationship between assertiveness and persuasion may be explained by how female assertiveness affects likeability and perceived competence. As discussed above, for women, assertiveness is a gender role violation. Assertive women were found to be evaluated as less intelligent and likeable than men exhibiting similar assertiveness (Lao et al., 1975). Kelly et al. (1980) also found that assertive female communicators were evaluated more negatively than males behaving identically. In another study, assertive behavior by a female confederate when assessed by female evaluators was rated unfavorably compared to less assertive behavior (Delamater & Mcnamara, 1991). Heilman et al. (1995) found assertive women were evaluated as more hostile and less rational. Wiley and Eskilson (1985) found that using a powerful speech style led to women being perceived as successful managers. However, such women were rated by men as less likeable compared to those who used tentative language. Prentice and Carranza (2002) found that traits such as assertiveness, competence, and intelligence were rated as less desirable for and less typical of women. Research shows that while assertiveness or directness in language leads to perception of competence, such women are still perceived as less likeable than those who use tentative language (Rudman, 1998; Juodvalkis et al., 2003). Therefore, I expect that although assertive women will be perceived as more competent, this gender role nonconformity will render them less likeable than tentative women.

H4: When evaluating female authors of social media messages, readers will perceive women who use assertive language as a) less likeable and b) more competent than women who use tentative language.

These perceptions about competence and likeability may influence persuasiveness. Perceived competence has been shown to affect source credibility and persuasion (McCroskey & Young, 1981; Burgoon et al., 1990). In his review of opinion change and advertising literature, Joseph (1982) noted that liking was the most consistent element of communicator perception such that physically attractive sources were consistently liked more than those who were less attractive, making them more influential. Reinhard et al. (2006) concluded that likeability of the communicator influenced message persuasiveness when the intent to persuade was explicit. Reinhard and Messner (2009) found similar evidence for the association between likeability and persuasion for explicit persuasive appeals for individuals with less motivation to process the message. Therefore, I expect that women who are perceived as more competent and likeable will be more persuasive.

H5: Readers who find a message author more likeable will also find the message more persuasive.

H6: Readers who find a message author to be more competent will also find the message to be more persuasive.

The strength of these hypothesized effects of women's attractiveness and assertiveness on their likeability, perceived competence, and persuasiveness is likely dependent on gender role beliefs. A stereotypically attractive woman may be seen as adhering to gender norms while one using assertive language may be in violation of such gendered expectations. Given that gender role expectations vary, these effects of attractiveness and assertiveness are likely influenced by

the message recipient's gender role attitude. There is evidence that endorsement of liberal or conservative gender norms affects some of the outcomes discussed above (Kern et al., 1985; Spence et al., 1975). Eagly and Karau (2002) reviewed the literature on female gender role and leadership roles and argued that agentic behaviors such as assertiveness are important to be evaluated as a competent leader but are incongruous to the injunctive norms of gender role for women (that require women to be more communal and less agentic). Such violation of norms has been found to be negatively evaluated (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). There is evidence that such negative evaluations are somewhat independent of other explicit information provided. Even when women were specifically described as successful leaders, they were still perceived as more hostile and less rational than their male counterparts (Heilman et al., 1995). Rudman and Phelan (2008) explained this dilemma faced by women in navigating conflicting demands of acting as a competent professional and adhering to gender stereotypes. They argued that women experienced a backlash effect for counter-stereotypical behavior.

Endorsement of these traditional gender role norms may influence the effect attractiveness and assertiveness have on the persuasiveness of women. As mentioned above, linguistic assertiveness is a masculine trait and as such a violation of traditional female gender norms. Attractiveness, on the other hand, is a favorable trait for women to have and does not violate traditional female gender norms. Sexist attitude of the message recipient, therefore, will likely moderate the proposed effects of attractiveness and assertiveness. In this study, sexism is operationalized as hostile sexism and benevolent sexism, based on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). For participants with greater sexist beliefs, I expect attractive women to be more persuasive and assertive women to be less persuasive.

H7: Readers' sexism will moderate the effects of attractiveness on persuasiveness:

H7a: Readers with high hostile sexism will be more influenced by a message author's physical attractiveness (via likeability and competence) than those with low hostile sexism.

H7b: Readers with high benevolent sexism will be more influenced by a message author's physical attractiveness (via likeability and competence) than those with low benevolent sexism.

H8: Readers' sexism will moderate the effects of assertiveness on persuasiveness:

H8a: Readers with high hostile sexism will perceive assertive women as less persuasive (via likeability and competence) than those with low hostile sexism.

H8b: Readers with high benevolent sexism will perceive assertive women as less persuasive (via likeability and competence) than those with low benevolent sexism.

Method

Design

This experiment employed a 2 x 2 factorial design to investigate the impact of attractiveness and assertiveness on persuasiveness. Participants read a faux social media post. The two independent variables were attractiveness of the post's female author (highly attractive vs. less attractive) and assertiveness of the language in the post (assertive vs. tentative). In addition, to increase generalizability, two separate topics were employed factorially - child care and drinking age. Two mediators were also measured, namely likeability and perceived competence. Sexism, which was measured separately as hostile sexism and benevolent sexism, was investigated as a potential moderator.

Participants

A sample of 250 participants was recruited from the United States through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing service. Each respondent received $0.80 upon completing the survey. The final sample of $n = 247$ valid responses was composed of 62.3%

males ($n = 154$). Ages ranged from 20 to 70 ($M = 35.69$, $SD = 10.37$). Of the participants, 73.3% ($n = 181$) identified as White, 9.3% ($n = 23$) identified as Asian, 6.8% ($n = 17$) identified as Mixed Race, 6.5% ($n = 16$) identified as Black or African American, 2.8% ($n = 7$) identified as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin, .8% ($n = 2$) identified as "others" and .4% ($n = 1$) identified as Middle Eastern or North African.

Materials

Each participant was shown a faux social media post that visually evoked a Facebook post. The text of the post in each condition was accompanied with an image of the post's putative author. The text portion contained the vignette with assertiveness manipulation and the accompanying image of the supposed author was used to manipulate attractiveness.

Attractiveness is a subjective trait that could be assessed based on a variety of factors. These factors include physical beauty traits such as facial symmetry, body shape, and positive facial expressions or other personal traits such as agreeableness or confidence. In this study, attractiveness implies physical beauty traits. Facial features have been found to influence assessments of physical attractiveness (Atoum, 1999). For example, eye size has been shown to affect perceptions of attractiveness (Cunningham et al., 1995) and warmth (Gonçalves et al., 2015). Faces with neonate large eyes have been found to be seen as more attractive across cultures (Asian, Hispanic, and White) (Cunningham et al., 1995). My study operationalized attractiveness as a holistic judgment rather than manipulating specific features; however, features such as those here identified likely contributed to those overall, heuristic judgments.

To select the stimuli for attractiveness, 40 photographs were pretested; each had been selected by scholars engaged in media effects research to fit categories of either highly attractive or less attractive. The highly attractive condition included women who were exceptionally

attractive. The less attractive condition included women with average physical attractiveness (and not women with extremely low physical attractiveness). These photographs were sourced from a variety of websites including a facial stimuli database (Minear & Park, 2004). Various aspects of these photographs such as background, facial expressions, and proportion of body visible were kept as similar as possible. Pre-test participants were instructed to rate each image on a 10-point scale. Four images with relatively small standard deviations and relatively high or low means, respectively, were selected for the highly attractive and less attractive conditions, respectively.

To select the stimuli for assertiveness, five vignettes were pretested. Each vignette was of approximately 150 words. The assertiveness of these vignettes was manipulated by changing elements of linguistic style (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Reid et al., 2009; Carli, 1990; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985; Lakoff, 1973). The tentative message condition contained linguistic elements such as disclaimers ('I may be wrong' or 'I am not an expert') and tag questions (such as 'isn't it?', 'right?' or 'don't you think?') that have been shown to reduce the assertive quality of a message (Carli, 1990; Reid et al., 2009; Bradac et al., 1981). These vignettes were either on the topic of 'childcare' or 'legal drinking age'. Gender-neutral topics were selected to reduce differences in the interest, knowledge, or opinions based on the participant's gender. Although childcare may seem to be a possibly gendered topic, both these topics have previously been shown to be gender neutral in nature (Carli, 1989). On a 6-point scale, pre-test participants rated each vignette on items such as assertive, strong, confident, and powerful. Two vignettes that had statistically different scores for their assertive and tentative versions were selected as the stimuli for assertiveness (one was about childcare and the other about legal drinking age).

Measures

Likeability

Likeability was measured on a scale with three items (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very"). Participants were asked how pleasant, likeable, and trustworthy the woman whose post they read seemed to be (Lao et al., 1975; Reid et al., 2009). Scores were averaged ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.42$, α = .94).

Perceived Competence

Perceived competence was measured using a scale with four items (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very"). Participants were asked to rate how competent, knowledgeable, rational, and intelligent the woman whose post they read seemed to be (Reid et al., 2009). Scores were averaged ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.46$, α = .96).

Persuasiveness

Persuasiveness was operationalized by measuring perceived persuasiveness, that has been shown to be a valid measure for this construct (Dillard, Shen, et al., 2007; Dillard, Weber, et al., 2007) and has been used to measure persuasiveness of messages (Chen et al., 2016). A 7-point semantic differential scale developed by Dillard and colleagues was used to measure it. Participants responded to items such as "not-persuasive" or "persuasive", "ineffective" or "effective", "not convincing" or "convincing", "not compelling" or "compelling", "unreasonable" or "reasonable", "illogical" or "logical", "irrational" or "rational" and "not true to life" or "true to life". Scores were averaged ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.61$, α = .97).

Gender Role Attitude

Gender role attitude was measured using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This inventory uses a 6-point scale anchored at "disagree strongly" and "agree strongly" and gives separate scores for hostile and benevolent sexism. Scores were averaged for

hostile sexism ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.28$, $\alpha = .94$) and benevolent sexism ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.25$, $\alpha = .92$).

Manipulation Check

Two items were included to ascertain how attractive and assertive the women in each condition were perceived to be. On a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very", participants rated the attractiveness and assertiveness of the woman in the post. Both manipulations were successful. Participants in the attractive condition perceived the target image as highly attractive ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.3$) while those in less attractive condition perceived the target as only moderately attractive ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.48$). Assertiveness score was high for the vignettes in the assertive condition ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.39$). However, the vignettes for tentative condition were also perceived as moderately assertive ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.67$).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They began by answering a series of questions regarding sexism, the moderating variable. Following that, they read a fictitious social media post. This post was designed to visually resemble Facebook. It displayed the vignette along with a photograph of the woman who was its putative author. Participants saw the post for at least one minute. They then responded to questions about the woman's likeability, perceived competence, and persuasiveness. This was followed by demographic, attention check, and manipulation check questions. The entire survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Results

Main Effects

A two-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to explore the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on likeability, perceived competence, and persuasiveness. Hostile sexism and participant gender were included as covariates.

Persuasiveness

There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness, indicating persuasiveness of the highly attractive condition ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.61$) was not significantly different from the less attractive condition ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.61$). Thus, H2 was not supported. There was no significant main effect of assertiveness on persuasiveness, indicating persuasiveness for the assertive condition ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.67$) was not significantly different from the tentative condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.56$). Thus, H3 was not supported. The interaction between attractiveness and assertiveness was not significant. There was a significant main effect of hostile sexism on persuasiveness, $F(1, 235) = 9.2$, $p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$.

Likeability

There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on likeability, indicating likeability of highly attractive condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.42$) was not significantly different from less attractive condition ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.4$). Thus, H1a was not supported. There was no significant main effect of assertiveness on likeability, indicating persuasiveness for the assertive condition ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.48$) was not significantly different from the tentative condition ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.37$). Thus, H4a was not supported. The interaction between attractiveness and assertiveness was not significant. There was a significant main effect of gender identity on likeability, $F(1, 234) = 7.09$, $p = .008$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Also, there was a significant main effect of hostile sexism on likeability, $F(1, 234) = 21.6$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$.

Perceived Competence

There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on perceived competence, indicating persuasiveness of the highly attractive condition ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.4$) was not significantly different from the less attractive condition ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.5$). Thus, H1b was not supported. There was no significant main effect of assertiveness on perceived competence, indicating persuasiveness for the assertive condition ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.42$) was not significantly different from the tentative condition ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.49$). Thus, H4b was not supported. The interaction between attractiveness and assertiveness was not significant. There was a significant main effect of hostile sexism on perceived competence, $F (1, 235) = 10.76$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$.

Indirect Effects

Attractiveness

To test the moderated mediation model, I used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2018; Model 7). The following set of analyses had attractiveness as the independent variable and persuasiveness was the dependent variable. The effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was expected to be mediated by perceived competence and likeability. The effect of attractiveness on these two mediators was expected to be moderated by sexism, specifically hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Gender identity and sexual orientation were entered as covariates.

I first tested a moderated-mediation model with perceived competence as the mediator, expecting the effect of attractiveness on perceived competence to be moderated by hostile and benevolent sexism. For benevolent sexism, there was no significant direct effect of attractiveness on perceived competence or persuasiveness. There was a significant direct effect of perceived competence on persuasiveness, $b = .91$, $t(242) = 22.75$, $p < .001$. Thus, H6 was supported. There was a significant effect of benevolent sexism on perceived competence, $b = -.22$, $t(241) = -2.13$,

p = .034. There was a significant interaction effect of attractiveness and benevolent sexism on perceived competence, *b* =.34, *t*(241) = 2.13, *p* = .022. To examine the nature of this interaction, the effect of attractiveness on perceived competence was tested at varying levels of benevolent sexism, specifically at the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean. At low levels (-1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on perceived competence was negative but not significant. At moderate levels (mean value) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on perceived competence was positive and significant, effect = .41, *SE* = .18, *p* = .028, 95% CI [.04, .77]. At high levels (+1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on perceived competence was positive and significant, effect = .83, *SE* = .26, *p* = .002, 95% CI [.32, 1.34]. Overall, there was a significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism, index = .31, *SE* = .14, 95% CI [.03, .59]. This provides support for H7b. To examine this further, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was tested at varying levels of benevolent sexism, specifically at the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean. At low levels (-1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was negative but not significant. At moderate levels (mean value) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was positive and significant, indirect effect = .37, *SE* = .17, 95% CI [.03, .70]. At high levels (+1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was positive and significant, indirect effect = .76, *SE* = .24, 95% CI [.29, 1.23].

For hostile sexism, there was no significant direct effect of attractiveness on perceived competence or persuasiveness. There was a significant effect of hostile sexism on perceived competence, *b* = -.31, *t*(241) = -3.03, *p* = .003. However, there was no significant interaction

effect of attractiveness and hostile sexism on perceived competence. Also, there was no significant moderated mediation effect for hostile sexism. Thus, H7a was not supported.

I then tested a moderated-mediation model with likeability as the mediator, expecting the effect of attractiveness on likeability to be moderated by hostile and benevolent sexism. For benevolent sexism, there was no significant direct effect of attractiveness on likeability or persuasiveness. There was a significant direct effect of likeability on persuasiveness, $b = .80$, $t(241) = 15.45$, $p < .001$. Thus, H5 was supported. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on likeability. There was a significant interaction effect of attractiveness and benevolent sexism on likeability, $b = .34$, $t(240) = 2.4$, $p = .017$. To examine the nature of this interaction, the effect of attractiveness on likeability was tested at varying levels of benevolent sexism, specifically at the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean. At low levels (-1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on likeability was negative but not significant. At moderate levels (mean) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on likeability was positive but not significant. At high levels (+1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on likeability was positive and significant, effect = .76, $SE = .25$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.26, 1.26]. Overall, there was a significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism, index = .28, $SE = .12$, 95% CI [.03, .51]. This provides support for H7b. To examine this further, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was tested at varying levels of benevolent sexism, specifically at the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean. At low levels (-1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was negative but not significant. At moderate levels (mean value) of benevolent sexism, the effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness was positive but not significant. At high levels (+1 standard deviation) of benevolent sexism, the effect of

attractiveness on persuasiveness was positive and significant, effect = .61, *SE* = .2, 95% CI [.21, 1].

For hostile sexism, there was no significant direct effect of attractiveness on likeability or persuasiveness. There was a significant direct effect of hostile sexism on likeability, *b* = -.42, *t*(240) = -4.33, *p* < .001. There was a significant direct effect of likeability on persuasiveness, *b* = .80, *t*(241) = 15.45, *p* < .001. Thus, H5 was supported. However, there was no significant interaction effect of attractiveness and hostile sexism on likeability. Also, there was no significant moderated mediation effect for hostile sexism. Thus, H7a was not supported.

Assertiveness

The following set of analyses had assertiveness as the independent variable and persuasiveness was the dependent variable. The effect of assertiveness on persuasiveness was expected to be mediated by perceived competence and likeability. The effect of assertiveness on these two mediators was expected to be moderated by sexism, i.e., hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Gender identity and sexual orientation were entered as covariates.

I first tested a moderated-mediation model with perceived competence as the mediator, expecting the effect of assertiveness on perceived competence to be moderated by hostile and benevolent sexism. For benevolent sexism, there was no significant direct effect of assertiveness on perceived competence or persuasiveness. There was a significant direct effect of perceived competence on persuasiveness, *b* = .91, *t*(242) = 22.89, *p* <.001. Thus, H6 was supported. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on perceived competence. There was no significant interaction effect of assertiveness and benevolent sexism on perceived competence. There was no significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism. Thus, H8b was not supported.

For hostile sexism, there was a significant effect of hostile sexism on perceived competence, $b = -.29$, $t(241) = -2.94$, $p = .004$. However, there was no significant interaction effect of assertiveness and hostile sexism on perceived competence. Also, there was no significant moderated mediation effect for hostile sexism. Thus, H8a was not supported.

I then tested a moderated-mediation model with likeability as the mediator, expecting the effect of assertiveness on likeability to be moderated by hostile and benevolent sexism. For benevolent sexism, there was no significant direct effect of assertiveness on likeability or persuasiveness. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on likeability. There was no significant interaction effect of assertiveness and benevolent sexism on likeability. There was no significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism. Thus, H8b was not supported.

For hostile sexism, there was a significant effect of hostile sexism on likeability, $b = -.36$, $t(240) = -3.84$, $p < .001$. Also, there was a significant effect of likeability on persuasiveness, $b = .81$, $t(241) = 15.65$, $p < .001$. This further supports H6. However, there was no significant interaction effect of assertiveness and hostile sexism on likeability. Also, there was no significant moderated mediation effect for hostile sexism. Thus, H8a was not supported.

Discussion

In an experiment that manipulated the attractiveness and assertiveness of female authors of social media posts, I examined the likeability, perceived competence, and persuasiveness of women posting these messages. Attractiveness and assertiveness did not directly affect persuasiveness, nor did they simply affect likeability or perceived competence. Instead, attractiveness influenced persuasiveness via perceived competence and likeability when moderated by benevolent sexism. At moderate and high levels of benevolent sexism, attractiveness positively influenced persuasiveness via perceived competence. In addition,

attractiveness influenced persuasion via likeability at high levels of benevolent sexism. Also, benevolent sexism had a direct effect on perceived competence but not likeability. Hostile sexism, however, had a direct effect on both likeability and perceived competence. I did not find support for the hypothesized moderated mediation effect of message assertiveness on persuasiveness via likeability or perceived competence.

These findings about the effects of attractiveness show that a woman's physical beauty influences perceptions about her. Even modest differences in attractiveness level seem to inspire different outcomes for women. High physical attractiveness likely makes an opinionated message from a woman more palatable for certain people. Possibly, this leeway is reserved only for highly attractive women because irrespective of their adherence to other gender normative expectations, they are seen as at least adhering to the idealized norms of physical beauty for their gender. This is concerning because rewarding women for adhering to beauty norms sends the message that prioritizing attention to physical appearance is crucial for them. Such a message may motivate adherence to beauty standards, inflated as they are, and require women to scrutinize their physical appearance, thus, possibly distracting attention from other aspects of their being.

At times, the threats posed by normative beauty expectations may translate into mainstream rhetoric as almost benign. However, past research has shown that to be untrue. Normative beauty ideals have been criticized as means to maintain traditional gender hierarchies (Ramati-Ziber et al., 2020). This requirement for women to look a certain way to access a host of personal and professional rewards limits women's power and agency. This study provides further evidence that imposition of high beauty standards has tangible negative consequences for women. It was found to affect women's likeability, competence perception, and ability to

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persuade, each of which have implications for women's success and well-being. Likeability, for example, has been shown to influence job performance outcomes (Allen & Rush, 1998; Cardy & Dobbins, 1986), voter preferences (Patton & Kaericher, 1980), and dating preferences (Riggio & Woll, 1984). Perceived competence has been shown to influence hiring decisions (Haefner, 1977) and status attribution (Durante et al., 2010).

These findings in a setup wherein exposure to attractiveness manipulation was relatively short demonstrates that such effects are not limited to the workplace or dating arenas—they occur in online settings such as social media where message exposure may be short and message environment may have distractors. Beyond the relatively limited nature of a photographic visual cue, such effects may be amplified when the communicator's presence is more prominent, such as in video formats or face to face communication. Evidence that these normative beauty expectations permeate digital boundaries is concerning because of its potential to motivate women to maintain a visually pleasing online presence. This motivation may make women more vulnerable to engage in certain online behaviors that have consequences for their well-being. For example, women have been found to be more likely to engage in photo-editing behaviors (Dhir et al., 2016), and engaging with such tools have been shown to have detrimental effects (McLean et al., 2015). If liberation from inequitable scrutiny is a valid goal for women empowerment, then evidence that women's adherence to normative beauty standards is scrutinized even during the briefest of online interactions is disheartening. Exploring these inequities and the ways in which they manifest online should lead us toward a clearer understanding of how women's messages are evaluated, specifically in a virtual environment.

Beyond documenting the implications of physical attractiveness for women, this study also examines the links between beauty expectations and sexism. Findings from this study

support the framework of ambivalent sexism and demonstrate how hostile and benevolent sexism operate differently. While benevolent sexism moderated the effects of attractiveness, hostile sexism did not. Evidence that physical beauty reaps rewards is not surprising, given the general halo effects of being attractive. However, its tie to sexist attitudes draws attention to the socially constructed aspects of feminine beauty. For people with high benevolent sexism, a woman's physical beauty seems to act as a differentiator in determining how her message is processed. This may be indicative of the ideals of femininity that they subscribe to, non-adherence to which is penalized. On the other hand, as expected, hostile sexism is more overtly cruel. In this study, people high in hostile sexism liked women less and thought of them as less competent. While benevolent sexism rejected unattractive women, hostile sexism seems to reject all women. People with hostile sexist attitudes seem to penalize women for being women, not for being a certain kind of woman.

These dissimilar reactions to a woman's physical beauty demonstrate how these two forms of sexism influence one's beliefs and perceptions differently. The idea of an attractive woman may mean different things to those with benevolent and hostile sexist attitudes. It may so be that for those with benevolent sexist attitudes, being highly attractive fulfills certain normative expectations, thus, yielding relatively positive evaluations. People with such attitudes tend to put women on a pedestal and advocate for preferential treatment of these ideal women. Stemming from the beliefs that good women are delicate and must be protected or otherwise treated reverentially, maybe benevolent sexist attitudes make people feel that since attractive women qualify as good women, they are special and deserve to be liked, listened to, and agreed with.

Alternatively, the difference in outcomes may not be a reward for being exceptionally pretty but a penalty for not being pretty enough. People with benevolent sexist attitudes may

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view women who fall short of attaining high beauty ideals as not feminine enough to warrant the special treatment reserved for the more idealistic women. Since these women fall short of the ideal, they are not deemed particularly likeable, competent, or worthy of being persuaded by. To people with such attitudes, these stringent evaluations may not feel as a bias against womankind, but a fair assessment of women who are just not good enough. However, evidence from this study is a rejection of the ordinary-looking women, not women with exceptionally low attractiveness. Since most women are ordinary-looking and fall short of these extraordinary beauty ideals, benevolent sexism essentially licenses unfair treatment of most women and resists being labelled malicious by citing the reverential treatment of a select few. This may make benevolent sexism especially difficult to recognize and resist, making it a more deceptive threat. Since its sexist biases are masked behind a pretense of holding women as special and advocating for women to be protected and cherished, its ill-effects are less obvious. However, findings from this study add to the evidence that such sexist attitudes have real detrimental effects. It implicates the misplaced portrayal of modern feminism as an overreaction to well-intentioned comments such as the ones praising qualities of physical appearance, warmth, or care and reveals some of the consequences of such seemingly harmless behaviors. However well-intentioned, such behaviors limit women. They reinstate women into familiar boundaries of social roles wherein not adhering to norms such as feminine beauty limits the extent to which they are liked, heard, or deemed competent.

In contrast, people with hostile sexist attitudes may be experiencing women's attractiveness differently. Their immunity to the pacifying effects of attractiveness may in part be because they tend to believe that women use their beauty to exercise power. While people with benevolent sexist attitudes may view highly attractive women as ideal, those with hostile sexist

attitudes may be viewing such women as the ultimate threat. However, hostile sexism had a direct effect on both likeability and perceived competence. People with high hostile sexism rated women as less likeable and less competent. Less likability is an expected outcome of subscribing to such attitudes as hostile sexism implies a general distrust and dislike for all women. Also, people with such attitudes tend to believe that women are beneath men and, therefore, may think of all women as less competent. On the contrary, benevolent sexism did not have a direct effect on likeability, thus, indicating that people subscribing to such attitudes may not have an inherent dislike for women. This is expected, as for people with benevolent sexist attitudes women are special and to be admired, indicating an affable attitude toward women as a group or at least toward women who, as per the norms, rightly belong to that revered group. With regards to benevolent sexism and competence perception, the results in this study were mixed. Thus, although people with benevolent sexist attitudes do not dislike women, their evaluation of women's competence and abilities is less clear. Their restricted view of what women should ideally be or do may limit what they consider women capable of being and doing.

Hypothesized effects for violating normative expectations of assertiveness for women did not find support in this study. Participants did not evaluate women's use of assertive language negatively. This may indicate that female assertiveness is not always penalized. It is possible that moderate level of linguistic assertiveness is not counterproductive for women. Perhaps this is indicative of changing gender norms. Although these findings contradict past research, there is some evidence in the literature that the link between gender and evaluation of assertiveness is contextual. For example, past research has shown that gender salience can influence how female assertiveness is evaluated (Reid et al., 2009). Therefore, it is possible that in the context of specific topics such as gender-neutral ones used in this study, requirements for gender norm

adherence are relaxed. Such leniency may not apply when the topic is not independent of gendered expectations. Employing topics that do not control for gender neutrality or topics that cover sensitive themes may trigger normative gender role beliefs and more severe evaluations.

There is also some indication of mixed findings regarding the association between gender and assertiveness evaluation in the literature. For example, Holtgraves and Lasky (1999) found assertiveness evaluation to be tolerant of gender effects and speculated that the specific marker of linguistic power employed to manipulate assertiveness could be responsible for this variation in effects. It is plausible that the linguistic manipulation of assertiveness employed in this study was rather conservative and was not perceived as a gender atypical use of language. Subtle markers of linguistic power used here may have been lacking in intensity or frequency. Therefore, such language may not have markedly violated feminine gender role norms. Greater linguistic intensity or more overt forms of assertive behavior than textual language intensity may activate normative censorship behaviors.

It is also possible that any opinionated message from a woman is perceived as somewhat assertive, irrespective of its linguistic intensity. Messages used in this study have a persuasive intent and, therefore, express an opinion about a given topic. Taking a stance and attempting to persuade could intrinsically be perceived as a rather assertive behavior for women. This may be why the average assertiveness score of the tentative condition was moderate. Since women were endorsing a certain viewpoint, they may not have been perceived as quite as tentative. Consequently, the linguistic power differential between the assertive and tentative conditions may not have been enough to motivate censorship of gender atypical language.

This study attempted to understand how persuasive social media messages from women are evaluated based on adherence to normative gender expectations of attractiveness and

assertiveness. The notion that women are evaluated differently based on their physical appearance, even during brief online engagements, is problematic because such scrutiny may make them more vulnerable to known negative consequences such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction associated with women's greater use of digital media (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018). These findings are indicative of the societal pressure women may experience to internalize and meet idealized beauty norms.

In addition, this paper emphasized the distinct role of benevolent sexism in evaluation of women. Benevolent sexism may be more representative of the kind of sexism women face in today's western societies. Women likely encounter benevolent forms of sexism more often than overtly-hostile sexist behaviors. This makes it important for researchers to further investigate how women are affected by this form of sexism. Evidence from this study demonstrates that benevolent sexism may not be the lesser of the two evils. Its deceptively subtle nature may, in fact, make it a stronger adversary than hostile sexism. There is evidence that while hostile sexism motivates action for collective change, benevolent sexism undermines it (Becker & Wright, 2011). All things considered; benevolent sexism seems rather malevolent.

In conclusion, the goal of this study was to understand what enables women to be heard, liked, and deemed influential and competent. Sexist attitudes and gender-normative expectations of beauty but not tentativeness had some effect on these outcomes. For future research, identifying and acknowledging the negative consequences of such gender-normative expectations is important. There is evidence that increased attention to forms of benign sexism can reduce sexist beliefs in both men and women, such changes being stable over time (Becker & Swim, 2011). Therefore, further investigation of how different forms of sexism manifest and

the negative outcomes they impose on women would be crucial in sensitizing people of its

repercussions, thus, empowering women to be heard, liked, and deemed competent.

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Chapter 3. Evaluation of Feminist Messages on Social Media

Abstract

Women often use social media to advance feminist agenda. They share and endorse messages that advocate for women's issues. This study examined the effects of women's physical attractiveness and assertiveness of their message on their persuasiveness, reader's sexism, and reader's behavioral intentions. Likeability and perceptions of competence were hypothesized to moderate these effects. Benevolent sexism was treated as a moderator. Effects of these independent variables on the gender based collective self-esteem of female participants were also explored. In an online experiment, faux social media posts were used to manipulate message assertiveness and women's pictures were used to manipulate attractiveness. Participants ($n =$ 196) were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing service. Findings suggest that attractiveness and assertiveness interact to influence women's collective self-esteem. Attractiveness was found to have an indirect, negative effect on modern sexism through perceived competence. This was moderated by benevolent sexism. Assertiveness did not have indirect effects on outcome variables. Neither of the independent variables had any main effects.

Keywords: feminism, persuasion, modern sexism, benevolent sexism, collective self-esteem, attractiveness, assertiveness

Chapter 3

Evaluation of Feminist Messages on Social Media

Assertiveness

Women displaying counter-stereotypical traits have been shown to be penalized (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Assertiveness, being a stereotypically masculine characteristic (Bem, 1974), is one such trait. A specific form of assertive behavior is the use of assertive language. When women use strong language, they risk being evaluated punitively. Women who use agentic language have been found to be less persuasive than men who use such language (Winkler et al., 2017). In a review, Carli (2001) concluded that women are less influential than men in general and are particularly less influential than men when they use a dominant communication style. In specific contexts, such as when listeners are male, research consistently shows evidence of a backlash against women using powerful language. Women have been found to be more influential with men when they speak tentatively, but less influential with women (Carli, 1990). When speaking to men and when gender identity was salient, women using assertive language have been found to be less influential than women who speak tentatively (Reid et al., 2009). Given such evaluations of women's assertiveness, I hypothesize that:

H1: When reading messages putatively authored by women, readers will be less persuaded by messages that use assertive language than by similar messages that use tentative language.

One possible explanation for women's assertiveness to not translate into greater power to influence could be that although assertiveness aids women's competence assessment, it reduces their likeability. Assertive women have been found to be evaluated as less likeable than men exhibiting similar assertiveness (Lao et al., 1975; Kelly et al., 1980). Wiley and Eskilson (1985)

found that while both male and female participants rated women using powerful language as more successful managers compared to women using powerless language (intensifiers, hedges, etc.), men perceived women using powerful language as less likeable. In another study, women using a submissive communication style were found to be perceived as more likeable (but less hireable) than women using a dominant communication style (Juodvalkis et al., 2003). In contrast, assertiveness has positive consequences for competence perceptions. Meta-analytical review shows that women displaying explicit forms of dominance (such as direct demands) were found to be seen as less likeable but no less competent as similarly behaving men (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Past research shows that assertive women are, in fact, seen as more competent than less assertive women. When women display assertive behaviors such as confronting sexism, they have been found to be perceived as competent but less warm (Becker et al., 2011). Agentic or assertive women have been found to be evaluated as more competent (Phelan et al., 2008; Juodvalkis et al., 2003; Kelly et al., 1980), intelligent (Lao et al., 1975), and successful as managers (Wiley & Eskilson, 1985) compared to women who are communal or tentative. Therefore, I predict the following:

H2: When evaluating female authors of social media messages, readers will perceive women who use assertive language as a) less likeable and b) more competent than women who use tentative language.

Physical Attractiveness

If women's assertiveness is penalized because it violates gender norms, presence of other indicators of femininity should soften this backlash. Adherence to beauty ideals could be one such indicator of femininity. Women who are physically attractive have been shown to be

perceived as more feminine (Gillen, 1981; Lucker et al., 1981). Therefore, it is likely that the penalty for assertiveness is less severe for women who are highly attractive.

Physical attractiveness has been shown to generate halo effects. There is support for such beauty stereotypes that imply "what is beautiful is good" (Dion et al., 1972). Meta-analytical review has found these halo effects of physical attractiveness to be moderate and varied (Eagly et al., 1991), being more evident in evaluation of social competence (popular, likable) and intellectual competence (intelligent, skillful) and being stronger when explicit information about the specific trait was absent (Jackson et al., 1995). Given these findings, it is likely that in addition to the assertive quality of their language, women's physical beauty also influences their likeability and competence perception. Therefore, I predict that:

H3: When evaluating female authors of social media messages, readers will perceive highly attractive authors as a) more likeable and b) more competent than less attractive authors.

Beyond these halo effects, physical attractiveness also has implications for the persuasive process. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), source physical attractiveness is a heuristic cue in communication processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When motivation for message processing is low, source characteristics, such as physical appearance, could affect message processing. Social media is a high distraction environment; scrolling through social media messages is likely a low involvement task. Therefore, it is possible that the author's physical appearance, as a source characteristic, affects message processing. Attractiveness has been argued to be a status characteristic such that being highly attractive could be perceived as a cue for high status (Webster & Driskell, 1983). Perhaps being such a status cue enables it to influence persuasive processes. Research supports such an effect of attractiveness on persuasion. Physically attractive people have been found to be more persuasive than those who are less

attractive (Chaiken, 1979; Reinhard et al., 2006). Attractiveness has been found to interact with argument quality such that given a strong argument quality, attractive authors have been found to be seen as more persuasive than those less attractive (Puckett et al., 1983). Pallak (1983) found that when the attractiveness of an author was made salient, the author's message was processed heuristically, and when attractiveness had low salience, the author's message was processed systematically.

Research also shows that attractive women are granted affordances that less attractive women are not. For example, attractive women have been found to behave more assertively than less attractive women (Campbell et al., 1986), perhaps, because they receive less backlash for behaving assertively. Women with traditionally feminine physical appearance have been found to be perceived as more persuasive when making a feminist speech compared to women who appeared masculine; attitudes related to gender role have been found to change in the intended direction when the speaker was feminine-looking and in the opposite direction when the speaker was masculine-looking (Bullock & Fernald, 2003). These leniencies granted to highly attractive women, in addition to the general effects of attractiveness on persuasive processes discussed above, imply that being physically attractive should bolster a female author's persuasive power. Therefore, I predict the following:

H4: Readers will be more persuaded by messages putatively authored by highly attractive women than by messages putatively authored by women who are less attractive.

Sexism

The effects of an author's physical attractiveness and assertiveness hypothesized above would likely be affected by readers' sexism. Those with a higher degree of sexism would expect women to behave communally and adhere to feminine beauty norms. Contrarily, those with more

egalitarian views about gender would likely not endorse penalizing women for behaving assertively or not adhering to beauty norms. As such, the degree of sexist beliefs is predicted to moderate the expected effects of the author's physical attractiveness.

Sexism likely moderates the effects of physical attractiveness as attractiveness ideals have been shown to be linked with various forms of sexism. Endorsing western beauty ideals have been found to be associated with various measures of sexism (e.g., traditional sexism measured using Attitude Toward Women Scale, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism measured using Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, and hostility toward women using Hostility Toward Women Scale) (Forbes et al., 2007). For Chinese women, internalization of beauty ideals was found to be associated with hostile sexism and, to a lesser extent, with benevolent sexism; the relationship was found to be mediated by objectification (Xiao & Wang, 2021).

I also predict that sexism will moderate the effects of author's assertiveness on evaluations of the author's likeability and competence as well as her persuasiveness. People with more sexist attitudes have been shown to evaluate assertive women more negatively on factors such as behavioral desirability (likeability, social skills, etc.) and competence compared to men displaying similar assertiveness (Kern et al., 1985). Eagly and Karau (2002) use role incongruity theory to explain such prejudice, wherein women receive negative evaluations when they display agency because it violates gender role norms. More recent research has found support for expectation states theory over role congruity theory, indicating that it is not agency but competence perception that explains gender differences in social influence (Reid et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2019). Either way, those who ascribe to sexist beliefs would likely be more wary of assertive women. Therefore, I predict the following:

H5: Readers' sexism will moderate the effects of attractiveness on persuasiveness such that those with high benevolent sexism will be more influenced by a message author's physical attractiveness (via likeability and competence) than those with low benevolent sexism.

H6: Readers' sexism will moderate the effects of assertiveness on persuasiveness such that those with high benevolent sexism will perceive assertive women as less persuasive (via likeability and competence) than those with low benevolent sexism.

Modern Sexism

I also explored whether assertive quality of a feminist message facilitates or hinders the goal of reducing sexism. Research shows that magnitude of sexist beliefs can be altered. For example, manipulating the perceived size of gender differences has been found to predict corresponding change in sexism (Zell et al., 2016). So, exposure to feminist messages has some potential to influence participant's sexism. Past studies on reducing sexism have examined various outcomes of confronting it and the likely success of interventions. According to a review, while confronting sexism has been shown to have both positive and negative outcomes, research about interventions for reducing sexism is limited (Becker et al., 2014). Some interventions, such as learning about heterosexual male privilege, have been shown to reduce endorsement of modern sexism (Case et al., 2014).

This study examines if a message denouncing sexism is more effective when it uses assertive or tentative language. Assertively denouncing sexism is important not only to communicate urgency for change but has also been shown to have positive consequences for women. Despite the benefits behaving assertively against sexism might offer, women are often, understandably so, fearful of challenging sexist violations assertively. For example, a study that explored women's self-reported responses to sexism and other prejudices found that responding

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assertively to prejudice was linked to greater satisfaction and closure. However, the study also found that women reported being more likely to consider responding assertively to prejudices than actually confronting them assertively (Hyers, 2007).

Given the innate nature of demanding change requires assertiveness, understanding the effects of assertiveness on sexism would assist women's feminist goals. Past research on general effects of women's assertiveness is inconclusive and research on its effects on sexism is limited. In a study that manipulated both aggressiveness and assertiveness, women behaving aggressively were found to negatively affect attitudes toward women (using AWS i.e., Attitude Toward Women Scale) but such negative sanctions were not invoked by women behaving assertively (Hall & Black, 1979). The authors speculated that the nonsignificant results for assertiveness could be attributed to either relatively mild manipulation of assertiveness or acceptance of certain assertive behaviors by college students. However, other research suggests that women's assertiveness and feminist labeling is perceived as a power-threat by some men. High-power men have been found to experience greater power-stress and report lower liking when exposed to an assertive, feminist woman than when exposed to a nonassertive, compliant woman. Such negative evaluations for assertive women were less evident in men with lower power motivation (Fodor et al., 2012). More specifically, assertively advocating against sexism on social media could make women susceptible to negative evaluations, owing to its public nature. Women who confront sexism publicly have been found to be evaluated less favorably than women who confront it privately (Gervais & Hillard, 2014). Furthermore, those who do so assertively could be more likely seen as feminists and evaluated more negatively than those who confront it less assertively; women who identify themselves as feminists have been found to be seen as less a victim of gender discrimination than women who identify themselves as non-feminists (Roy et

al., 2009). Contrarily, other research shows that women confronting sexism may be perceived positively. Research suggests that women who confront sexism are seen as more competent, albeit less warm (Becker et al., 2011). Moreover, as stated above, assertive women are seen as more competent than less assertive women. So, it is also likely that assertive women's feminist messages will be more successful in reducing sexism, owing to their perceived competence. However, for women, perceptions of social skills have been shown to affect outcomes such as hireability and influence more than perceptions of their competence (Phelan et al., 2008). Therefore, I predict that overall, when the messenger is a woman, highly assertive language makes the message less palatable.

H7: Participants in the assertive message condition will report higher sexism than those in tentative message condition.

H8: Readers who endorse BS will report higher sexism when they read an assertive message than when they read a tentative message.

H9: Likeability will mediate the effect of assertiveness on modern sexism such that participants will perceive assertive women as less likeable, lesser likeability will lead to greater modern sexism in these participants compared to those in the tentative message condition.

H10: Perceived competence will mediate the effect of assertiveness on modern sexism such that participants will perceive assertive women as more competent, greater perceived competence will lead to lower modern sexism in these participants compared to those in the tentative message condition.

Effects of physical attractiveness on sexist beliefs is less clear. There is evidence that, for men, objectification of women increases hostile sexism and decreases hostility toward men (Rollero, 2013). Glick et al. (2000) argue that women may potentially face stronger hostile

sexism when they are perceived to be using their sexual attractiveness to gain power over men (Glick et al., 2000). However, the effect of physical attractiveness that does not objectify or sexualize women is less known. Based on research mentioned above, halo effects of physical attractiveness account for greater likeability and perceived competence. Such positive evaluations may lead to less hostile attitude toward highly attractive women. As discussed above, there is evidence that some aspects of attractiveness, such as femininity, facilitates feminist goals (Bullock & Fernald, 2003). Therefore, I predict the following:

H11: Likeability will mediate the effect of attractiveness on modern sexism such that participants will perceive attractive women as more likeable, more likeability will lead to lower modern sexism in these participants compared to those in the less attractive condition.

H12: Perceived competence will mediate the effect of attractiveness on modern sexism such that participants will perceive attractive women as more competent, greater perceived competence will lead to lower modern sexism in these participants compared to those in the less attractive condition.

Collective Self-Esteem

Exposure to feminist messages may also influence participant's feelings toward their gender group. While research on the effects of collective action in the context of gendered issues is not conclusive, there is evidence that active, public, collective action has positive consequences for women's well-being (Foster, 2015; Becker et al., 2011). Publicly tweeting about sexism has been shown to decrease negative affect and increase well-being (Foster, 2015). The effects of mere exposure to feminist social media messages on individual and collective measures for women are less clear. Given the positive consequences of active and public actions to address gender issues, it is likely that a more assertive rejection of gender inequalities may be

seen as an indication of greater group efficacy in challenging the status quo. Exposure to such assertive feminist messages should then positively influence women's well-being and their collective self-esteem with respect to their gender group. Therefore, I predict the following:

H13: Women who read assertive feminist messages will report greater collective self-esteem compared to those who read tentative feminist messages.

RQ1: How does the author's physical attractiveness influence this relationship?

Behavioral Intentions

Positive evaluations of messages based on communicator's attractiveness or message assertiveness may also influence participants intended behavior on social media. Whether feminist posts on social media receive social endorsements would decide a particular post's reachability. For example, high levels of attractiveness may improve chances of social endorsements. Therefore, I explore the following:

RQ2: How do attractiveness and assertiveness influence participant's intentions for social endorsement?

Method

Design

In this study, a 2 x 2 factorial design was used to examine how a female communicator's physical attractiveness and linguistic assertiveness impacted the persuasiveness of her feminist message and readers' sexist beliefs and collective self-esteem. The female communicator's perceived likeability and competence were predicted to mediate these effects. Also, these effects were expected to be moderated by reader's benevolent sexism. Participants read a faux social media article post and a woman's comment on that post. The assertiveness of the language used in this comment (assertive vs. tentative) and the physical attractiveness of the women who posted

this comment (highly attractive vs. less attractive) were manipulated. For greater generalizability, two different topics were employed factorially – the Paycheck Fairness Act and women as leaders.

Participants

A sample of 250 participants was recruited from the United States through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing service. Each respondent received $1.00 upon completing the survey. The final sample of $n = 196$ valid responses was composed of 52% males ($n = 102$). Most participants identified as 'heterosexual or straight', 89.8% ($n = 176$) followed by 'others', 5.61% ($n = 11$) and 'homosexual', 4.59% ($n = 9$). Ages ranged from 20 to 75 ($M = 40.39$, $SD = 11.97$). Of the participants, 75% ($n = 147$) identified as White, 9.7% ($n = 19$) identified as Black or African American, 6.1% ($n = 12$) identified as Asian, 4.59% ($n = 9$) identified as being from multiple races, 2.6% ($n = 5$) identified as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin, 1.5% ($n = 3$) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.5% ($n = 1$) identified as Middle Eastern or North African. The median income range was $10,000 to $19,000 and the mode for income was $100,000 and over. More than half the participants had at least a bachelor's degree, 51.02% ($n = 100$).

Materials

Participants were shown a faux social media post. This post was designed to resemble Facebook posts. After reading the post, participants read a comment made on that post. The comment was putatively authored by a woman; it was accompanied with her photograph and her name. The text of the comment was used to manipulate assertiveness and the woman's photograph was used to manipulate attractiveness. An example of the experimental manipulation is presented in Figure 3.1.

Forty photographs were pretested to select the stimuli for attractiveness. These photographs were sourced from a variety of websites including a facial stimuli database (Minear & Park, 2004). Other aspects of the images such as background, facial expressions, and proportion of body visible were kept as similar as possible. The woman's name was also kept constant across conditions. Pre-test participants rated each image on a 10-point scale. Three images with relatively small standard deviations and relatively high means were selected for the highly attractive condition. In this pretest, images for low attractiveness were still rated as about average. Another pretest was done with six new images from similar sources and following similar protocols for maintaining uniformity. Out of these, three images with relatively small standard deviations and relatively low means were selected as stimuli for the low attractiveness condition.

For selecting the stimuli for assertiveness, four vignette topics were pretested. These four topics were 'Equal Pay Act', 'Paycheck Fairness Act', 'household chores', and 'women as leaders'. As two of these topics discussed laws, participants were shown an informational article that informed them about the topic, in general. To maintain uniformity, the other two topics also had an informational article informing about general aspects of the topic (such as statistics on gender split of domestic labor and women in leadership positions) without expressing any opinions on the topic. After reading the informational article, participants saw another paragraph that was supposedly a comment sharing someone's opinion about the informational article. The text of this comment was used to manipulate assertiveness by altering elements of its linguistic style (Carli, 1990). Assertive message condition used emphatic language and exclamations and avoided weak linguistic markers such as disclaimers ('I may be wrong' or 'I am not an expert') and hedges ('perhaps', probably', 'somewhat'). Tentative message condition used less emphatic

language and included disclaimers and hedges. Pre-test participants were shown either all assertive or all tentative versions of the four vignette topics. They then rated how assertive, strong, confident, and powerful each vignette was, on a 6-point scale. Two vignettes that had statistically different scores for their assertive and tentative versions were selected as the stimuli for assertiveness (see Table 3.1). Topics selected were the 'Paycheck Fairness Act' and 'women as leaders'. Vignettes in the assertive condition had approximately 110 words. Tentative vignettes were longer (approximately 130 words) as they had disclaimers and other additional linguistic elements.

Measures

Likeability

On a scale with three items (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very"), participants rated how pleasant, likeable, and trustworthy the putative author seemed to be (Lao et al. 1975; Reid et al. 2009). Scores were averaged ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.61$, $\alpha = .93$).

Perceived Competence

On a scale with four items (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very"), participants rated how competent, knowledgeable, rational, and intelligent the author seemed to be (Reid et al. 2009). Scores were averaged ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.44$, $\alpha = .94$).

Persuasiveness

Perceived persuasiveness has been shown to be a valid measure for persuasion (Dillard, Shen, et al., 2007; Dillard, Weber, et al., 2007) and past research has used perceived persuasiveness to operationalize message persuasiveness (Chen et al., 2016). Participants rated the author on a 7-point semantic differential scale (Dillard, Shen, et al., 2007; Dillard, Weber, et al., 2007). This scale consisted of items such as "not-persuasive" or "persuasive", "ineffective"

or "effective", "not convincing" or "convincing", "not compelling" or "compelling", "unreasonable" or "reasonable", "illogical" or "logical", "irrational" or "rational" and "not true to life" or "true to life". Scores were averaged (M = 4.8, SD = 1.73, α = .97).

Sexism

Two sexism scales were used. The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996) was used to measure sexism before exposure to the experimental manipulation. ASI is a 6-point scale (0 = "disagree strongly", 5 = "agree strongly") and gives separate scores for hostile and benevolent sexism. Scores were averaged for hostile sexism (M = 2.54, SD = 1.26, α = .94) and benevolent sexism (M = 2.97, SD = 1.25, α = .92).

Modern sexism scale (Swim et al., 1995) was used to measure post-exposure sexism. Participants responded on a 7-point scale (1 = "strongly agree", 7 = "strongly disagree") to statements such as "Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States". Scores were averaged (M = 3.12, SD = 1.65, α = .94).

Collective Self-Esteem

Items of the Collective Self-Esteem (CSE) scale were adjusted to measure participant's self-esteem with respect to their gender group. Participants responded on a 7-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree") based on how they felt about their gender groups and their membership in it. Scores were added together to give a total CSE score (M = 82.12, SD = 14.82, α = .89).

This scale had four subscales measuring specific domains of collective self-esteem, namely public, private, membership, and identity (see Table 3.2). In addition to a total CSE score, four subscale CSE scores were also calculated. Each domain was measured using four

items, two of these items were reverse coded. Scores for these four items were added to give a subscale CSE score for each of the four domains of CSE.

Behavioral Intention

Participants indicated whether they would 'like', 'dislike', or 'not react' to the informational article post and the putative author's comment.

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to rate the attractiveness and assertiveness of the woman in the post on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Both manipulations were successful. Participants in the attractive condition rated the woman as highly attractive ($M = 5.9$, $SD = .99$) while those in less attractive condition rated the woman as less attractive ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.48$). Vignettes in the assertive condition were rated as highly assertive ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.17$). However, participants perceived the vignettes in the tentative condition as moderately assertive ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.48$).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They first responded to a questionnaire that measured sexism as the moderating variable. Then, they read two fictitious social media posts. These posts were designed to resemble Facebook. The first post was an informational article about either the Paycheck Fairness Act or women as leaders. This informational article post was displayed for at least 40 seconds. The second post was described as a woman's comment on the informational article they had just read. This second post included a vignette of the woman's opinion on the topic alongside her photograph. This post was displayed for at least one minute. Participants then responded to questions about their reactions (such as 'like' or 'dislike') to these two posts. They also answered questions about the likability,

perceived competence, and persuasiveness of the woman whose comment they read followed by

questions about sexism, behavioral intention, and collective self-esteem. Lastly, they answered

demographic, attention check, and manipulation check questions. The entire survey took

approximately twenty minutes to complete.

Results

I first tested for associations between the dependent variables. As expected,

persuasiveness, likeability, and perceived competence were positively correlated (see Table 3.3).

Hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and modern sexism were also positively correlated (see Table

3.4).

Main Effects

I examined the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on likeability, perceived

competence, persuasiveness, modern sexism, collective self-esteem, and behavioral intention

using two-way between-subjects ANOVAs. To account for any differences between the two

vignette topics, a variable identifying it was created and entered as another fixed factor.

Persuasiveness

There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on persuasiveness i.e.,

persuasiveness of the highly attractive condition ($M = 27.42$, $SD = 15.45$) and the less attractive

condition ($M = 24.87$, $SD = 14.54$) were not significantly different. Thus, H4 was not supported.

There was no significant main effect of assertiveness on persuasiveness i.e., persuasiveness of

the assertive condition ($M = 27.03$, $SD = 14.51$) and the tentative condition ($M = 25.09$, $SD =$

15.42) were not significantly different. Thus, H1 was not supported. The was no significant

interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on persuasiveness.

Likeability

There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on likeability i.e., likeability in the highly attractive condition ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.6$) and the less attractive condition ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.61$) were not significantly different. Thus, H3a was not supported. There was no significant main effect of assertiveness on likeability i.e., likeability in the assertive condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.58$) and the tentative condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.63$) were not significantly different. Thus, H2a was not supported. There was no significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on likeability.

Perceived Competence

There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on perceived competence i.e., perceived competence in the highly attractive condition ($M = 31.1$, $SD = 14.17$) and the less attractive condition ($M = 27.77$, $SD = 13.46$) were not significantly different. Thus, H3b was not supported. There was no significant main effect of assertiveness on perceived competence i.e., perceived competence in the assertive condition ($M = 29.12$, $SD = 13.1$) and the tentative condition ($M = 29.44$, $SD = 14.59$) were not significantly different. Thus, H2b was not supported. There was no significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on perceived competence.

Modern Sexism

For this set of analysis, hostile and benevolent sexism were entered as covariates. There was no significant main effect of attractiveness on modern sexism i.e., modern sexism reported by those in the highly attractive condition ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.66$) and the less attractive condition ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.65$) were not significantly different. There was a significant main effect of assertiveness on modern sexism, $F (1, 186) = 4.74$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Participants reported significantly lower modern sexism when they read an assertive comment ($M = 3.02$, SD

= 1.51) compared to when they read a tentative comment (M = 3.22, SD = 1.77) from a woman. There was no significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on modern sexism.

Collective Self-Esteem

I conducted a two-way between-subjects ANOVA to test the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on the collective self-esteem of female participants. For women, there was no significant main effect of attractiveness or assertiveness on CSE. There was a significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on women's CSE, F (1, 85) = 11.24, p = .001, partial η^2 = .12. Therefore, H13 was partially supported.

Next, I ran a two-way between-subjects ANOVA to test the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on the four domains of CSE. There was a significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on public, F (1, 85) = 8.88, p = .004, partial η^2 = .01, membership, F (1, 85) = 11.58, p = .001, partial η^2 = .12, and private, F (1, 85) = 4.2, p = .044, partial η^2 = .05 domains of collective self-esteem. There was no significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on identity domain of CSE, F (1, 85) = 2.3, p = .13, partial η^2 = .03. Post-hoc t-tests revealed that membership CSE for participants in the less attractive, assertive condition (M = 21.00, SD = 4.84) and less attractive, tentative condition (M = 24.17, SD = 3.61) were significantly different, t(49) = 2.62, p = .01.

I also ran exploratory analyses for male participants. There was no significant main effect of attractiveness or assertiveness on the CSE of men. There was no significant interaction of attractiveness and assertiveness on their CSE, F (1, 94) = 2.95, p = .09, partial η^2 = .03. Then, I ran similar analyses looking specifically at each of the four domains of CSE. There was no significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on public, F (1, 94) = .03, p = .87, partial η^2 = .000, membership, F (1, 94) = 2.37, p = .13, partial η^2 = .03, or private, F (1,

94) = 1.58, $p = .21$, partial η^2 = .02 domains of collective self-esteem. There was a significant interaction effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on the identity domain of CSE, $F(1, 94) = 5.33$, $p = .02$, partial η^2 = .05.

Behavioral Intentions

I conducted a two-way between-subjects ANOVA to test the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on participant's behavioral intentions. There was no significant main effect of attractiveness or assertiveness on behavioral intentions. There was no significant interaction effect.

Indirect Effects

I used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2018; Model 7) to test the moderated mediation models. For the following set of analyses, persuasiveness was the dependent variable. Assertiveness and attractiveness were the independent variables, examined in two separate analyses. Perceived competence and likeability were expected to mediate the effects of attractiveness and assertiveness on persuasiveness and benevolent sexism was expected to moderate this mediation. Gender identity was entered as a covariate.

Persuasiveness

Attractiveness. There was no direct effect of attractiveness on perceived competence and persuasiveness. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on perceived competence. The interaction effect of attractiveness and benevolent sexism on perceived competence was not significant. There was no significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism. Thus, hypothesis H5 was not supported (see Table 3.5).

There was no direct effect of attractiveness on likability and persuasiveness. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on likability. The interaction effect of attractiveness

and benevolent sexism on likeability was not significant. There was no significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism. Thus, hypothesis H5 was not supported (see Table 3.6).

Assertiveness. There was no direct effect of assertiveness on perceived competence. There was a direct effect of assertiveness on persuasiveness. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on perceived competence. The interaction effect of assertiveness and benevolent sexism on perceived competence was not significant. There was no significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism. Thus, hypothesis H6 was not supported (see Table 3.7).

There was no direct effect of assertiveness on likability. There was a direct effect of assertiveness on persuasiveness. There was no significant effect of benevolent sexism on likeability. The interaction effect of assertiveness and benevolent sexism on likeability was not significant. There was no significant moderated mediation effect for benevolent sexism. Thus, hypothesis H6 was not supported (see Table 3.8).

Modern Sexism

Assertiveness. For the following set of analyses, I had assertiveness as the independent variable and modern sexism as the dependent variable. Benevolent sexism and gender identity (operationalized here as men versus all other gender identities) were expected to moderate the effect of assertiveness on modern sexism (Hayes 2018; Model 3).

Assertiveness did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Benevolent sexism had a significant effect on modern sexism. The interaction effect of assertiveness and gender identity on modern sexism was significant such that for men assertiveness had a negative effect on modern sexism score. The interaction effect of benevolent sexism and gender identity on modern sexism was significant. The three-way interaction effect of assertiveness, benevolent sexism, and

gender identity on modern sexism was not significant. Therefore, H7 and H8 were not supported (see Table 3.9).

Next, I tested whether likeability and perceived competence mediated the effects of assertiveness on modern sexism (Hayes 2018; Model 4). Hostile sexism and benevolent sexism were entered as covariates. For the model with likeability as the mediator, assertiveness had a significant effect on modern sexism. Likeability and hostile sexism had a significant effect on modern sexism. Benevolent sexism did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Hostile sexism and benevolent sexism had a significant effect on likeability. Indirect effect of assertiveness on modern sexism was not significant. Therefore, H9 was not supported (see Table 3.10).

For the model with perceived competence as the mediator, assertiveness had a significant effect on modern sexism. Perceived competence and hostile sexism had a significant effect on modern sexism. Benevolent sexism did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Hostile sexism and benevolent sexism had a significant effect on perceived competence. Indirect effect of assertiveness on modern sexism was not significant. Therefore, H10 was not supported (see Table 3.11).

Attractiveness. For the following set of analyses, I used another model from the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2018; Model 3). Attractiveness was the independent variable and modern sexism was the dependent variable. Benevolent sexism and gender identity (operationalized here as men versus all other gender identities) were expected to moderate the effect of attractiveness on modern sexism.

Attractiveness did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Benevolent sexism had a significant effect on modern sexism. The interaction effect of benevolent sexism and gender

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identity on modern sexism was significant. The three-way interaction effect of attractiveness, BS, and gender identity on modern sexism was not significant (see Table 3.12).

Next, I tested whether likeability and perceived competence mediated the effects of attractiveness on modern sexism (Hayes 2018; Model 4). Hostile sexism and benevolent sexism were entered as covariates. For likeability as the mediator, attractiveness did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Likeability and hostile sexism had a significant effect on modern sexism. Benevolent sexism did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Attractiveness, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism had a significant effect on likeability. Indirect effect of attractiveness on modern sexism was significant. Therefore, H11 was supported (see Table 3.13).

For perceived competence as the mediator, attractiveness did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Perceived competence and hostile sexism had a significant effect on modern sexism. Benevolent sexism did not have a significant effect on modern sexism. Attractiveness, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism had a significant effect on perceived competence. Indirect effect of attractiveness on modern sexism was significant. Therefore, H12 was supported (see Table 3.14).

Discussion

In this study, I examined the effects of women's physical attractiveness and message assertiveness on their likeability, perceived competence, and persuasiveness as well as the effects on participant's collective self-esteem for their gender group, sexist beliefs, and intention to endorse the message. Attractiveness or assertiveness did not directly affect likeability, perceived competence, or persuasiveness. There was also no support for the hypothesized moderated mediation effect of attractiveness and assertiveness on persuasiveness. For female participants,

attractiveness or assertiveness had no direct effect on CSE, but a significant interaction effect.

This finding indicates that attractiveness or assertiveness do not independently influence

women's CSE but their interaction influences it such that women report lower membership

collective self-esteem when they view a less attractive woman use assertive language than when

they view a less attractive woman use tentative language. Since membership CSE has to do with

how a woman evaluates her worthiness as a member of her gender group, this finding implies

that women see themselves as less worthy members of their gender group when they view a less

attractive woman being assertive in her feminist demands than when they are exposed to a less

attractive woman being tentative.

Attractiveness had no direct effect on sexism. However, it had a significant, negative

indirect effect on modern sexism through perceived competence. This indicates that participants

who were exposed to women who were highly attractive reported lower sexism owing to their

perception that the woman was competent. It makes sense that competence would explain the

effect on sexism, given the message is about a feminist issue. Viewing a feminist message from a

woman that is being perceived as competent should result in lower sexism. The findings from

this study support this notion. Unfortunately, it also shows that feminists who do not adhere to

normative ideals of beauty could be seen as less competent and likely invoke greater sexism.

Assertiveness had a direct effect on sexism such that participants who read assertive

messages from women reported less sexism. It did not have the hypothesized moderated

mediation effect on modern sexism via likeability or perceived competence. Gender identity (for

males versus non-males) interacted with benevolent sexism such that exposure to attractive

women and assertive messages led to less reported modern sexism. Assertiveness had a direct

effect on persuasiveness and modern sexism in moderated-mediation models with likeability as

the mediator. Although likeability and competence could not explain the effects of assertiveness on sexism, assertiveness did influence sexism directly. Exposure to women who assertively advocated for feminist rights led to lower reported sexism. This is an optimistic finding that indicates that women using assertiveness in online messages demanding women's rights invoke less sexism from viewers than when they make such demands tentatively. It is possible that exposure to women being gender atypically assertive makes gender an unreliable construct, thus, resulting in lower sexism. If liking and competence perceptions are not the mechanisms that explain this effect, future studies should attempt to examine other possible mediators.

This study contributes to the literature by exploring several outcomes that may be affected by women's physical appearance and linguistic assertiveness. Past research on the effects of both these traits has helped identify contexts that make attractiveness and assertiveness more likely to influence certain outcomes. Although there is evidence that beauty has a positive influence on likeability (Berscheid et al., 1971; Byrne et al., 1968; Walster et al., 1966) and perceived competence (Jackson et al., 1995; Eagly et al., 1991), this finding was not supported by this study. When discussing feminist issues, highly attractive authors were not perceived as more likeable or more competent than less attractive authors. Additionally, attractiveness did not influence women's persuasiveness either directly or via likeability and competence. Despite the premium generally placed by social norms on women's physical appearance, this study did not find evidence that such advantages directly benefit women's persuasive appeals on social media through either enhanced liking or competence perception. However, physical attractiveness had other indirect effects.

Findings for the effects of exposure to assertive feminist messages, from women of varying attractiveness, on women's gender related collective self-esteem demonstrates the role of

beauty ideals in women's identification with other feminist women, their evaluations of such women, and the potential effects of online feminism on women's well-being. Online activism is sometimes criticized for not bringing about real change. It is sometimes referred to as 'slacktivism', a derogatory word described as "an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact" (Morozov, 2009, p.1). However, others suggest that online activism has several tangible benefits (Skoric, 2012) such as mobilization in real life (Christensen, 2011), increased awareness at a low cost, etc. Online feminism has been shown to offer similar benefits for women. A qualitative study concluded that using social media and internet bolsters feminist mobilization by increasing reachability and generating online communities of feminists (Crossley, 2015). Another study, using different operationalizations for online activism such as tweeting and sending email protests, found that online activism enhances women's well-being by providing a way to enact their gender identity (Foster, 2019). Publicly tweeting about sexism has been found to reduce negative affect and improve psychological well-being; these tweets have been found to show collective intent and action (Foster, 2015). Findings from this study add to the literature by demonstrating that online feminism influences certain domains of women's self-esteem derived from their gender group. This study provides further evidence that online activism matters. For women, exposure to feminist messages coming from other women has the power to influence how they see themselves as members of their gender group. Messages representing women's issues on social media do matter and affect how women see themselves as a part of womanhood.

The penalty less attractive women seem to be receiving in this study when they are assertive is concerning. I hypothesized that assertive feminist message would boost women's CSE but less attractive women with an assertive feminist message seem to have a negative effect

on women's membership domain of gender related CSE. The membership domain included items such as "I often feel like a useless member of my gender group" and "I feel I don't have much to offer to the gender group I belong to". Assertive messages supporting women's rights coming from women who were not highly attractive made female participants in this study to report lower self-esteem based on their perceptions of their own worthiness as a member of the female gender group. This is in some agreement with past research that has shown that adherence to feminine appearance assists feminist goals (Bullock & Fernald, 2003) and women who confront sexism publicly are evaluated less favorably (Gervais & Hillard, 2014). It is possible that public, assertive feminism when enacted by women who do not adhere to feminine beauty norms triggers an unappealing stereotype of the modern feminist woman (sometimes referred to using the derogatory term 'feminazi'). Negative social connotations of such feminists might be motivating women to distance themselves from their shared identity i.e., gender group membership. It is also possible that the inherent stereotypes of such feminists as masculine, confrontational, and domineering individuals may lead women to think of themselves as inadequate or make them feel uncertain of their role in the upliftment of their gender group, prompting feelings of less worthiness than when exposed to similar messages that use less demanding language.

One limitation of this study is that the manipulations for attractiveness and assertiveness were not quite parallel, one being visual and the other textual. Attractiveness is a subjective trait and it is possible that assertiveness of the women's message could have influenced assessments of her overall attractiveness. As such, assertiveness could also have potentially influenced the assessments of the woman's attractiveness. Another limitation of this study is that the tentative condition was seen as moderately assertive. Although I strengthened the manipulation for

assertiveness based on learnings from the first study, the tentative condition was still seen as somewhat assertive. It seems that any opinionated message from women, no matter how powerless a language it uses, is seen as moderately assertive. Future research should attempt to design ways to manipulate women's assertiveness more accurately.

Other factors that could potentially influence the assessments of assertiveness are participant's individual traits. Past research shows that people tend to be more influenced when message style matches their personality type (dominant versus submissive) (Moon, 2002). So, it is possible that the evaluation of assertiveness in women's messages are influenced by certain personality traits.

It is also likely that the effects of women's assertiveness are topic specific. As we see from the first and second study of this dissertation, gender neutral and feminist topics had different outcomes for women's evaluations. So, effects of women's assertiveness may be topic sensitive. For example, women's assertiveness may be evaluated differently based on whether the specific issue benefits them or someone else. According to a literature review, women are not penalized when they negotiate on behalf of others (other-advocacy) and avoid negotiating for themselves (self-advocacy) because they are fearful of backlash for their nonconformity (Wade, 2001). Understanding how women's assertiveness evaluations vary based on specific contexts, such as topic or who the beneficiaries of the advocated position happen to be, could help clarify its effects.

Conclusion

This study examined the evaluation of women's feminist messages on social media. Neither attractiveness nor assertiveness influenced persuasiveness, likeability, perceived competence, or behavioral intention. Physical attractiveness and linguistic assertiveness

interacted to influence female participant's collective self-esteem. Only assertiveness had a direct effect on modern sexism. Readers who read feminist messages articulated in assertive language expressed lower sexism than those who read such messages in tentative language.

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Table 3.1

Text for Vignettes Used to Manipulate Assertiveness

Condition	Topic	Vignette Text
Assertive	The Paycheck Fairness Act	Congress must pass the Paycheck Fairness Act. We must stop foolish wishful thinking that the gender pay gap will miraculously go away! Congress must address this by fixing the laws. The Equal Pay Act clearly cannot get us there on its own. Women will not get paid fairly unless employers are forced to be transparent about pay decisions. Employers must be stopped from retaliating against employees discussing salary information with coworkers. The Paycheck Fairness Act will regulate employers and strengthen the Equal Pay Act. It will fix misinterpretations of the Equal Pay Act in courts and shrink the gender pay gap. We must demand that Congress pass the Paycheck Fairness Act now!
Tentative	The Paycheck Fairness Act	Congress should consider passing the Paycheck Fairness Act. It is probably wishful thinking to assume that the gender pay gap will go away eventually. Congress should consider addressing this by improving the laws. I may be wrong, but it seems that the Equal Pay Act may not get us there on its own. Women will likely not get paid fairly unless employers are required to be transparent about pay decisions. Perhaps employers should be cautioned against discouraging employees from discussing salary information with coworkers. The Paycheck Fairness Act may possibly regulate employers and somewhat strengthen the Equal Pay Act. It seems that passing this legislation may potentially fix the misinterpretation of the Equal Pay Act in courts and somewhat reduce gender pay gap. We should encourage Congress to pass the Paycheck Fairness Act.
Assertive	Women as leaders	Women must occupy more positions of power. These pathetic increments making headlines is infuriating! What a shame! Until the novelty of a woman commander in chief has worn off, there is no celebrating. Women must get comfortable with power; society must get comfortable with powerful women. Patriarchy is a stubborn adversary. It must be brought down mercilessly. Not pacified, but ruthlessly defeated! We must fix the exits and detours women take between the classroom and the boardroom, and fast. There is no gender equality without power equality. Where power resides, women must be present. Where decisions are being made, women must be present. In the making of American history, women must be present!

Condition	Topic	Vignette Text
Tentative	Women as leaders	Women should probably occupy more positions of power. These little increments making headlines seems discouraging. Perhaps until the novelty of a woman commander in chief has worn off, there is little point celebrating. Women could try to get comfortable with power; society could try to get comfortable with powerful women. Patriarchy seems like a stubborn adversary. It should probably be brought down. Instead of pacifying it, maybe we should try to end it? We could work on fixing the exits and detours women take between the classroom and the boardroom. Gender equality might be tough without power equality. Where power resides, women should probably be present. Where decisions are being made, women should probably be present. In the making of American history, women should probably be present.

Table 3.2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability for Collective Self-Esteem Subscales

CSE Subscale	M	SD	Reliability
Public	19.71	4.51	0.74
Private	22.19	4.53	0.8
Membership	22.01	4.33	0.79
Identity	18.20	5.87	0.86

Table 3.3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Persuasiveness, Perceived Competence,

and Likeability

Variable	M	SD	1	2
1. Persuasiveness	4.8	1.73		
2. Perceived competence	5.22	1.44	.84**	
3. Likeability	4.8	1.61	.82**	.8**

** $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed); N = 196

Table 3.4

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Sexism Scales

Variable	M	SD	1	2
1. Hostile sexism	2.54	1.26		
2. Benevolent sexism	2.97	1.25	.41**	
3. Modern sexism	3.12	1.65	.75**	.320**

** p < 0.01 level (2-tailed); N = 196

Table 3.5

Effects of Attractiveness on Persuasiveness Mediated by Perceived Competence (PROCESS

Model 7)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
Attractiveness (X) Persuasiveness (Y) Competence (M) BS (W) GI (covariate)	Attractiveness on competence	$b = 6.92$, $t(191) = 1.35$, $p = .18$
	BS on competence	$b = .41$, $t(191) = .40$, $p = .69$
	Interaction effect of attractiveness and BS on competence	$b = -1.24$, $t(191) = -.78$, $p = .44$
	Attractiveness on persuasiveness	$b = -.5$, $t(192) = -.42$, $p = .67$
	Competence on persuasiveness	$\mathbf{b = .91, t(192) = 21.16, p < .001}$
	Moderated mediation	index $= -1.13$, $SE = 1.52$, 95% CI [-4.13,1.93]

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Gender Identity is abbreviated as GI. X, Y, M, and W denote the independent variable,

dependent variable, mediator, and moderator respectively.

Table 3.6

Effects of Attractiveness on Persuasiveness Mediated by Likeability (PROCESS Model 7)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Attractiveness on likeability	$b = 1.03$, $t(191) = 1.72$, $p = .09$
Attractiveness (X)	BS on likeability	$b = .12$, $t(191) = 1.02$, $p = .31$
Persuasiveness (Y)	Interaction effect of attractiveness and BS on likeability	$b = -.23$, $t(191) = -1.23$, $p = .22$
Likeability (M)		
BS (W)		
GI (covariate)	Attractiveness on persuasiveness	$b = -.19$, $t(192) = -.15$, $p = .88$
	Likeability on persuasiveness	$\boldsymbol{b = 7.64, t(19) = 19.93, p < .001}$
	Moderated mediation	index $= -1.75$, $SE = 1.53$, 95% CI [-4.66, 1.26]

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Gender Identity is abbreviated as GI. X, Y, M, and W denote the independent variable,

dependent variable, mediator, and moderator respectively.

Table 3.7

Effects of Assertiveness on Persuasiveness Mediated by Perceived Competence (PROCESS Model 7)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
Assertiveness (X) Persuasiveness (Y) Competence (M) BS (W) GI (covariate)	Assertiveness on competence	$b = 6.3$, $t(191) = 1.25$, $p = .21$
	BS on competence	$b = 1.1$, $t(191) = .99$, $p = .33$
	Interaction effect of assertiveness and BS on competence	$b = -2.39$, $t(191) = -1.53$, $p = .13$
	Assertiveness on persuasiveness	$\mathbf{b = 2.3}$, $\mathbf{t(192) = 1.98}$, $\mathbf{p = .05}$
	Competence on persuasiveness	$\mathbf{b = .91}$, $\mathbf{t(192) = 21.52}$, $\mathbf{p < .001}$
	Moderated mediation	index $= -2.19$, $SE = 1.5$, 95% CI [-5.21, .71]

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Gender Identity is abbreviated as GI. X, Y, M, and W denote the independent variable,

dependent variable, mediator, and moderator respectively.

Table 3.8

Effects of Assertiveness on Persuasiveness Mediated by Likeability (PROCESS Model 7)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
Assertiveness (X) Persuasiveness (Y) Likeability (M) BS (W) GI (covariate)	Assertiveness on likeability	$b = .09, t(191) = .16, p = .88$
	BS on likeability	$b = .1, t(191) = .77, p = .44$
	Interaction effect of assertiveness and BS on likeability	$b = -.14, t(191) = -.76, p = .45$
	Assertiveness on persuasiveness	**$b = 4.08, t(192) = 3.42, p < .001$**
	Likeability on persuasiveness	**$b = 7.76, t(192) = 20.87, p < .001$**
	Moderated mediation	index $= -1.09, SE = 1.51, 95\%$ CI $[-4.14, 1.83]$

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Gender Identity is abbreviated as GI. X, Y, M, and W denote the independent variable,

dependent variable, mediator, and moderator respectively.

Table 3.9

Effects of Assertiveness on Modern Sexism Moderated by Benevolent Sexism (PROCESS Model 3)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Assertiveness on modern sexism	$b = .15, t(188) = .21, p = .83$ (p=.04)
	Benevolent sexism on modern sexism	**$b = .71, t(188) = 3.97, p < .001$**
	Interaction effect of assertiveness and benevolent sexism on modern sexism	$b = .03, t(188) = .15, p = .88$
Assertiveness (X) Modern Sexism (Y) BS (W) GI (Z)[a]	Interaction effect of assertiveness and gender identity on modern sexism	**$b = -2.22, t(188) = -2.01, p = .05$**
	Interaction effect of benevolent sexism and gender identity on modern sexism	**$b = -.91, t(188) = -3.8, p < .001$**
	Three-way interaction effect of assertiveness, BS, and gender identity on modern sexism	$b = .45, t(188) = 1.3, p = .2$

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS. Gender Identity is abbreviated as GI. X and Y denote the independent and dependent variable respectively. W and Z denote moderators.

[a] In this analysis, gender identity implies male versus all other non-male participants.

Table 3.10

Effects of Assertiveness on Modern Sexism Mediated by Likeability (PROCESS Model 4)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Assertiveness on likeability	$b = -.23$, $t(192) = -1.03$, $p = .30$
	Hostile sexism on likeability	**$b = -.54$, $t(192) = -5.79$, $p < .001$**
	Benevolent sexism on likeability	**$b = -.23$, $t(192) = 2.48$, $p = .01$**
Assertiveness (X)	Assertiveness on modern sexism	**$b = -.40$, $t(191) = -2.76$, $p = .01$**
Modern Sexism (Y)		
Likeability (M)	Likeability on modern sexism	**$b = -.28$, $t(191) = -5.62$, $p < .001$**
HS, BS (covariates)		
	Hostile sexism on modern sexism	**$b = .83$, $t(191) = 12.07$, $p < .001$**
	Benevolent sexism on modern sexism	$b = .85$, $t(191) = 1.32$, $p = .19$
	Indirect effect of assertiveness on modern sexism	index $= .06$, *SE* $= .06$, 95% CI [-.05, .19]

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Hostile sexism is abbreviated as HS. X, Y, and M denote the independent variable, dependent

variable, and mediator respectively.

Table 3.11

Effects of Assertiveness on Modern Sexism Mediated by Perceived Competence (PROCESS

Model 4)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Assertiveness on competence	$b = .36, t(192) = .2, p = .84$
	Hostile sexism on competence	$b = -5.02, t(192) = -6.34, p < .001$
	Benevolent sexism on competence	$b = 1.68, t(192) = 2.11, p = .04$
Assertiveness (X) Modern Sexism (Y) Competence (M) HS, BS (covariates)	Assertiveness on modern sexism	$b = -.33, t(191) = -2.32, p = .02$
	Competence on modern sexism	$b = -.04, t(191) = -6.59, p < .001$
	Hostile sexism on modern sexism	$b = .79, t(191) = 11.66, p < .001$
	Benevolent sexism on modern sexism	$b = .83, t(191) = 1.33, p = .18$
	Indirect effect of assertiveness on modern sexism	index $= -.01, SE = .07, 95\%$ CI $[-,15, .11]$

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Hostile sexism is abbreviated as HS. X, Y, and M denote the independent variable, dependent

variable, and mediator respectively.

Table 3.12

Effects of Attractiveness on Modern Sexism Moderated by Benevolent Sexism (PROCESS Model 3)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Attractiveness on modern sexism	$b = -.58$, $t(188) = -.79$, $p = .43$
	Benevolent sexism on modern sexism	**$b = .69$, $t(188) = 4.5$, $p < .001$**
	Interaction effect of attractiveness and benevolent sexism on modern sexism	$b = .12$, $t(188) = .49$, $p = .63$
Attractiveness (X) Modern Sexism (Y) BS (W) GI (Z)[a]	Interaction effect of attractiveness and gender identity on modern sexism	$b = 1.71$, $t(188) = 1.52$, $p = .13$
	Interaction effect of benevolent sexism and gender identity on modern sexism	**$b = -.59$, $t(188) = -2.67$, $p = .01$**
	Three-way interaction effect of attractiveness, BS, and gender identity on modern sexism	$b = -.38$, $t(188) = -1.09$, $p = .28$

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS. Gender Identity is abbreviated as GI. X and Y denote the independent and dependent variable respectively. W and Z denote moderators.

[a] In this analysis, gender identity implies male versus all other non-male participants.

Table 3.13

Effects of Attractiveness on Modern Sexism Mediated by Likeability (PROCESS Model 4)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Attractiveness on likeability	$b = .43, t(192) = 2.05, p = .04$
	Hostile sexism on likeability	$b = -.56, t(192) = -6.03, p < .001$
	Benevolent sexism on likeability	$b = .24, t(192) = 2.6, p = .01$
Attractiveness (X) Modern Sexism (Y)	Attractiveness on modern sexism	$b = .02, t(191) = 2.6, p = .89$
Likeability (M) HS, BS (covariates)	Likeability on modern sexism	$b = -.27, t(191) = , p < .001$
	Hostile sexism on modern sexism	$b = .82, t(191) = , p < .001$
	Benevolent sexism on modern sexism	$b = .09, t(191) = , p = .19$
	Indirect effect of attractiveness on modern sexism	index $= -.12, SE = .06, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.26, -.004]$

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Hostile sexism is abbreviated as HS. X, Y, and M denote the independent variable, dependent

variable, and mediator respectively.

Table 3.14

Effects of Attractiveness on Modern Sexism Mediated by Perceived Competence (PROCESS
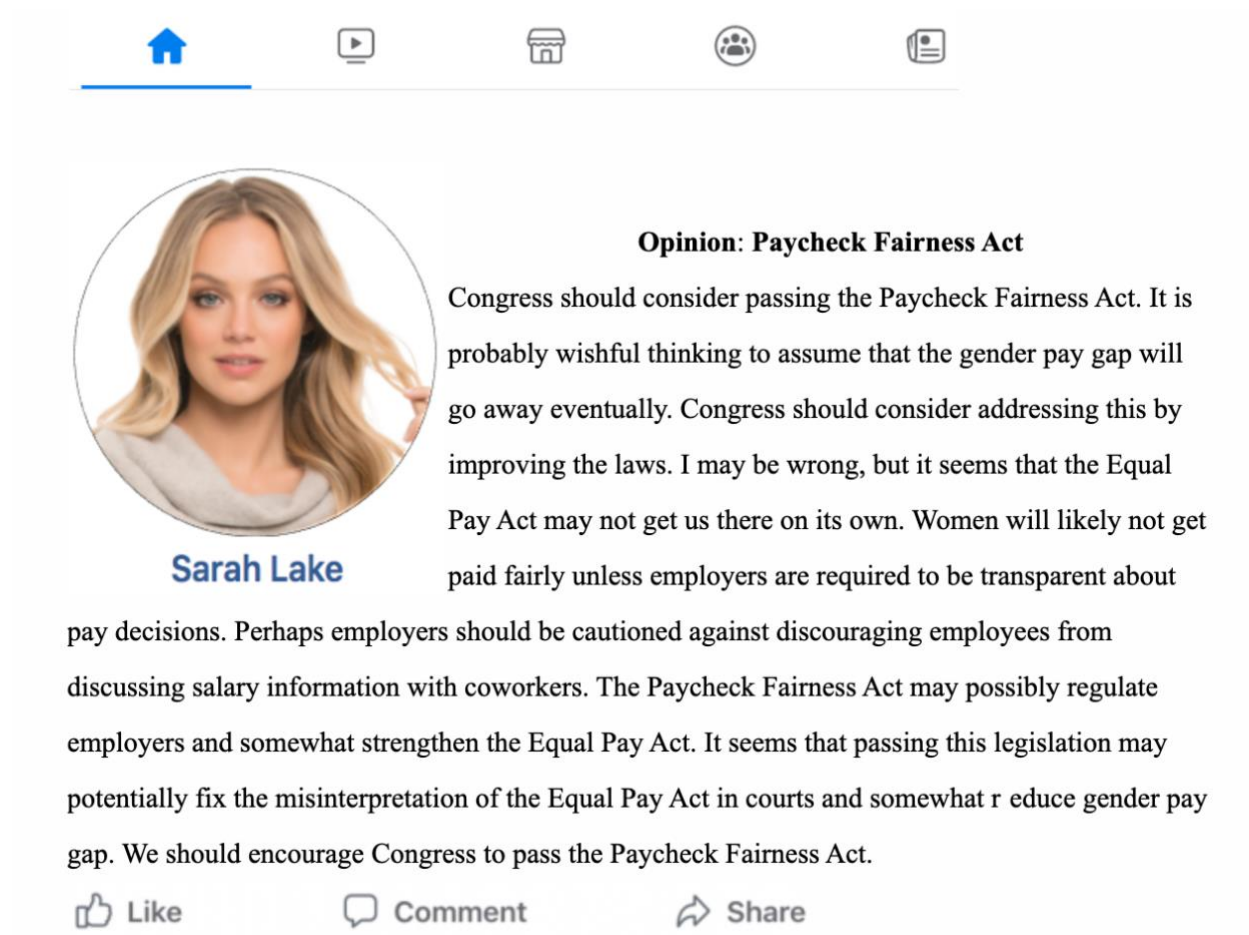
Model 4)

Model Parameters	Effects	Results
	Attractiveness on competence	**$b = 4.07, t(192) = 2.26, p = .03$**
	Hostile sexism on competence	**$b = -5.13, t(192) = -6.55, p < .001$**
	Benevolent sexism on competence	**$b = 1.74, t(192) = 2.22, p = .03$**
Attractiveness (X) Modern Sexism (Y) Competence (M) HS, BS (covariates)	Attractiveness on modern sexism	$b = .06, t(191) = .4, p = .69$
	Competence on modern sexism	**$b = -.04, t(191) = -6.52, p < .001$**
	Hostile sexism on modern sexism	**$b = .78, t(191) = 11.25, p < .001$**
	Benevolent sexism on modern sexism	$b = .09, t(191) = 1.38, p = .17$
	Indirect effect of attractiveness on modern sexism	**index $= -.15, SE = .07, 95\%$ CI $[-.31, -.02]$**

Note. Highlighted results are statistically significant. Benevolent sexism is abbreviated as BS.

Hostile sexism is abbreviated as HS. X, Y, and M denote the independent variable, dependent

variable, and mediator respectively.

Figure 3.1

Illustration of the Experimental Manipulation

Note. The woman's photograph shown here was not used in the actual experiment. It is representative of the kind of photographs actually used in the study.

Chapter 4. Pregnancy Portrayals on Instagram

Abstract

Research on media portrayals of celebrities has highlighted the problematic nature of media representation of pregnant bodies (Hopper & Aubrey, 2013). Pregnancy in the digital age is more visible and scrutinized. Social media is increasingly being used to share pregnancy content. This study examines pregnancy content on social media (Instagram) to understand the general characteristics of such posts and the nature of weight portrayals of pregnant women online. Findings indicated that Instagram presents an overly optimistic, commercialized, and inaccurate depiction of pregnancy. It was found to promote normative beauty ideals. Difficulties and practical aspects of pregnancy were seldom discussed. Implications for women who use social media for information, support, and entertainment were discussed.

Keywords: pregnancy, social media, Instagram, content analysis

Chapter 4

Pregnancy Portrayals on Instagram

Pregnancy and Media

Until recently, pregnancy was considered a private affair, an inappropriate subject for
public discourse. Discussions about pregnancy were limited to intimate social settings such as
family units, social groups of women, or clinical settings. Social norms required pregnant
women's bodies to be modestly concealed. Images of pregnant bodies were not widely available
(Matthews, 2000). Society's awkward denial of pregnancy has since been criticized as
detrimental to women's agency, among other things. Over the last few decades, norms around
pregnancy have, thus, changed.

Today, pregnancy is highly visible and scrutinized (Nash, 2012). There has been an
increase in media coverage of pregnancy (Gentile, 2011). Research has explored media's
obsession with celebrity pregnancies and their pre-occupation with applauding celebrities for
quickly shedding off their pregnancy weight. Media portrayals of celebrity pregnancies have
been found to rarely discuss weight or post-partum body dissatisfaction and have, thus, not been
representative of the experiences of non-celebrity women (Gow et al., 2012). Weight stigma,
such as pressure to quickly lose pregnancy weight, has been found to be common in media
(including news media) portrayals of pregnancy. Weight-related ideals promoted by media have
been found to be unrealistic and not adhering to medical guidelines (Nippert et al., 2021).
Therefore, research clearly shows that mainstream media's portrayal of pregnancy is inaccurate
and problematic.

Social media websites contribute to this enhanced visibility and scrutiny of pregnancy by
offering new ways for women to share their experiences, something pregnant women did not

have access to before. For example, thousands of sonogram photos and videos are shared every month on Instagram under the hashtag 'ultrasound' (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). Pregnant women have been found to increasingly use social media to share their experiences, gain knowledge and support during pregnancy (Jang & Dworkin, 2014; Johnson, 2015), and understand as well as demonstrate how pregnancy is done 'right' (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017).

Women seem to be using digital technologies such as mobile apps and social media websites to monitor their pregnancies and the health of their developing children (i.e., fetuses and infants) (Johnson, 2014). Women have been found to use social media to access information about pregnancy and/or parenting (89%) and seek social support (84%) (Baker & Yang, 2018). Social support is crucial for the well-being of pregnant women and their babies. It has been found to affect outcomes such as maternal competence and responsiveness (Porter & Hsu, 2003; Baker et al., 2013) and post-partum depression (Haslam et al., 2006). In a qualitative study looking at Chinese expectant mothers, majority of women (95%) reported social media usage during pregnancy to have a positive effect on their mental health (Zhu et al., 2019). A meta-analysis examining the use of social media and mobile health apps for health interventions found these technologies to be effective in managing pregnancy weight, gestational diabetes, and asthma with a moderate to large effect size and improving maternal mental health and pregnancy-related knowledge with a large effect size (Chan & Chen, 2019). Clearly, social media and digital technologies have the potential to benefit pregnant women. Therefore, understanding social media's portrayal of pregnancy has bearing on understanding the physical and mental well-being of expectant mothers and their babies.

New media could potentially counter the problematic depictions of pregnancy in mainstream media discussed above. Researchers have examined whether new media platforms

resist, reflect, or reinforce the stereotypical representation of women created through traditional

media platforms such as television and fashion magazines. Some studies support the claim that

the representations (in general, not pregnant women) on Instagram mimics those created by

traditional media (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015) while others suggest that Instagram is being

used to challenge mainstream media's narrative (such as censorship) (Olszanowski, 2014).

In this study, I examine pregnancy content on Instagram. This study will help elaborate

the general characteristics of such content and clarify whether it provides a wholesome narrative

of the varied experiences of pregnant women or echoes the stereotypical narratives that populate

mainstream media. Therefore, I explore the following:

Research Question 1: What are the general characteristics of pregnancy related content on

Instagram?

Pregnancy and Body Image

Pregnancy is a time of significant changes in a woman's physical appearance in a

relatively short period of time. According to an ethnographic study, pregnant bodies were found

to receive increased social scrutiny (Upton & Han, 2003). In this study, pregnant women

described their bodies as becoming more "visible" during pregnancy. Contemporary culture

around pregnancy, such as fitted maternity clothing that displays the baby bump or documenting

pregnancies on social media, has made pregnancy increasingly visible and public. Going through

substantial bodily changes in a short period while being increasingly socially visible and

scrutinized could likely make pregnant women vulnerable to body surveillance and body image

concerns.

Research examining changes in women's body image during pregnancy is not conclusive.

Studies have found body image to be stable (Duncombe et al., 2008), better (Loth et al., 2011;

Boscaglia et al., 2003; Davies & Wardle, 1994; Kazmierczak & Goodwin, 2011) or poorer (Moore, 1977; Inanir et al., 2015) during pregnancy. For example, pregnant women have been found to have greater body satisfaction compared to non-pregnant women (Loth et al., 2011) and score lower on measures of drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction (Davies & Wardle, 1994). Polish pregnant women in their third trimester have been found to report having positive body image during pregnancy (Kazmierczak & Goodwin, 2011). However, research lacks evidence for any relaxation of body ideals during pregnancy, indicating that any concessions pregnant women grant themselves with respect to their body size was state-dependent and not influenced by changes in body ideals (Davies & Wardle, 1994). A systematic review of the literature on body image in adolescent pregnancies concluded that the limited research on this topic was inconclusive, some studies found evidence of greater body dissatisfaction during pregnancy while others found pregnant women to have a stable or positive body image. (Zaltzman et al., 2015). Another systematic review concluded that pregnant women have varied body image concerns and their body image is dependent on ideals of feminine beauty (such as ideals of thinness and perfect skin). This review found that pregnant women managed their body image by differentiating between being fat (perceived as socially unacceptable) and being pregnant (perceived as socially acceptable). So, any concessions for weight gain due to pregnancy were not perceived to be extended to the postpartum period as women were no longer pregnant and were, thus, expected to regain control of their bodies. Thus, this review concluded that pregnant women's expectations of their postpartum bodies were unrealistic (Hodgkinson et al., 2014).

Factors such as women's pre-pregnancy weight (Fox & Yamaguchi, 1997), and stage in pregnancy, age, and pregnancy history (Hopper & Aubrey, 2013) have been found to influence their body image and state self-objectification, respectively. For example, a study looking at

pregnant women in their third trimester found that women with a normal pre-pregnancy weight were more likely to have a negative change in body image than women who were overweight before getting pregnant. However, overweight pregnant women still had more negative body shape concerns compared to normal weight pregnant women (Fox & Yamaguchi, 1997).

In research that reported poorer body image in pregnant women, it is unclear whether women are more vulnerable to body image concerns during early pregnancy or as the pregnancy became more obvious. Some studies have found women's body image perceptions to decline as the pregnancy progressed (Moore, 1977; Inanir et al., 2015) while another study examining pregnant women in their second and third trimesters reported that women were more likely to experience body dissatisfaction in the early to mid-second trimester (Skouteris et al., 2005).

Overall, it is evident that women experience varying degrees of body dissatisfaction and body image concerns throughout the different states of pregnancy and postpartum. Media messages women get likely influence their attitudes toward their changing bodies. An extension of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) explains how women can engage in self-objectification i.e., adopting a focus on external traits and viewing themselves through the gaze of others. This theory also predicts that outcomes related to objectification, such as mental health risks, will be influenced by various life-stages women go through such as puberty, childbearing age, postpartum, menopause, etc. Applying this theoretical framework, along with the increased scrutiny that modern pregnant women experience, pregnancy has the potential to make women vulnerable to self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and related mental health consequences. Exposure to media portrayals of pregnant bodies is likely to encourage body surveillance; the unrealistic media ideals for pregnant and postpartum bodies likely make social comparisons a negative experience for most women, leading to a greater risk of body dissatisfaction. Studies

have shown that exposure to images of pregnant and postpartum celebrities lead to higher self-objectification in pregnant (Hopper & Aubrey, 2013) and nonpregnant (Hopper & Aubrey, 2016) women, respectively. Therefore, given women's vulnerability to varied body image concerns during pregnancy and the likely role played by media portrayals in establishing the ideal pregnant body, I explore the following:

Research Question 2: What is the nature of weight portrayal in pregnancy-related content on Instagram?

Method

Sample

As examining the portrayals of pregnant bodies was one of the goals of this content analysis, I chose a popular photo-sharing website, Instagram. Thirty-two percent of internet users and 28% of US adults use Instagram, making it the second most popular social media website, next to Facebook, and the most popular photo-sharing social media website, slightly ahead of Pinterest (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Images were selected through systematic random sampling from public Instagram accounts. Only posts made in the English language were selected. I identified the top five hashtags used to tag pregnancy posts (#pregnancy, #pregnant, #preggo, #babybump, #bump). The basic unit of analysis was a post tagged with one of these hashtags. On each day, 25 posts were collected. In total, I collected 500 posts. At the time of coding, some of the links were no longer accessible. The final dataset excluded these inaccessible posts, resulting in a sample of n = 426.

Procedure

In the exploratory stage, a wide range of terms referencing pregnancy were searched to identify popular hashtags (based on number of posts per hashtag) used to tag such posts. Top five hashtags were shortlisted to identify relevant posts.

Data were collected in 2019 for 20 days, approximately between mid-January to mid-February. Data was collected on the same days of these five weeks i.e., weekdays excluding Thursdays. Time for daily data collection was randomly selected using a website to randomly generate time. I used a desktop computer for data collection, not a mobile device. To select a post, first the relevant hashtag was entered. The 'top posts' were skipped. Data was collected from the 'recent posts' category. A random number generator was used to select the image number for identifying the first post for data collection. The URL for this post was saved. Then, every tenth post from this first post was chosen and saved until I got five posts for the first hashtag. The same steps were then repeated for the remaining four hashtags. Irrelevant posts using these same hashtags (such as a road bump for #bump) or posts in foreign languages were ignored. Five posts per hashtag were collected daily i.e., total 25 posts per day, resulting in the initial sample of 500 posts.

Coding variables were decided based on past studies of similar nature (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Gow et al., 2012). Some of these variables included were promotional content, image content, portrayal of the pregnant belly, visibility of the pregnant woman's face, sexual suggestiveness, pregnancy-related challenges, references to pregnancy practices (such as types of deliveries, breastfeeding, etc.), physical appearance, fashion, health, fitness, and weight. For details about the coding scheme, see table 4.1. I coded four parts of each post – image, caption used to describe the post, any additional hashtags used to tag the post, and the first comment made on the post by another user.

To examine the research question about general characteristics of pregnancy portrayals I explored a variety of elements. Looking at the entire post, I coded for account verification, stage of the pregnancy (first, second, third trimester, or unsure), and any promotions or reviews for any product or service. For the image in the post, I coded for who or what was in the photo (pregnant women, father, other adults, children, food, etc.). When a pregnant woman was present in the photo, her belly (stretch marks, linea nigra, exposed versus covered), face (visible or not), and sexual suggestiveness were coded. Categories used to code for sexual suggestiveness were borrowed from a study on the nature of sexual content on television (Kunkel et al., 1999). For the caption and hashtags, I coded for various pregnancy-related challenges mentioned, references to emotions, fitness or health, beauty or fashion, and pregnancy practices. I also coded any references to the pregnant women's physical appearance in the first comment on the post.

For the second research question examining the nature of weight portrayal of pregnant women, I coded the weight of the pregnant woman (normal weight, underweight, overweight), any mention of weight in the caption or hashtags, and the general affect of such weight discussions (positive, neutral, or negative). To ascertain pregnant women's weight, I used a figure rating scale (Stunkard et al., 1983; Cardinal et al., 2006).

Coding Reliability

A detailed codebook was developed by two coders. Coders trained on pilot samples to identify variables with high disagreement and revised the coding scheme to minimize ambiguity. Twenty percent of the dataset was independently coded by both coders. Inter-coder reliability was established using an online tool, ReCal2 (Freelon, 2010). Inter-coder reliability was greater than .8 for most variables and greater than .75 for all variables.

Results

General Characteristics

I analyzed the visual characteristics of the image in the post as well as the content of the caption, comment, and other hashtags included in the post. Only two posts were from a verified celebrity account (0.5%). First, I examined the content of the photographs. Interestingly, about half of the posts had no pregnant woman (44.13%, $n = 188$). Fathers were rarely included (8.92%, $n = 38$). Children (17.14%, $n = 73$) and adults other than the parents (11.27%, $n = 48$) were included in comparatively more posts than were fathers. Ultrasound photos were rare (3.26%, $n = 16$). Other coded items, found in a small number of posts, included food (8.92%, $n = 38$) and pets (3.1%, $n = 13$). Other visual characteristics of the photographs were also analyzed. About one-fourth of the photographs that had a pregnant woman had the woman's face excluded (either hidden by phone, hair, etc., or a picture of just the body with head excluded; 23.53%, $n = 56$), had the pregnant belly exposed (23.53%, $n = 56$), and had some degree of sexual suggestiveness (26.03%, $n = 63$). Majority of the exposed pregnant bellies were without any 'imperfections' such as stretch marks (96.43%, $n = 54$) or linea nigra (94.64%, $n = 53$).

Next, I explored the representation of different trimesters of pregnancy. Majority of the posts did not clearly indicate the stage of pregnancy (69.72%, $n = 297$). Of the ones that did indicate pregnancy stage, most were in the third (56.59%, $n = 73$) and second (34.88%, $n = 45$) trimesters. Posts of first trimester pregnancies were rare (2.6%, $n = 11$).

I further examined the content of what was being discussed in the posts (captions and hashtags). Majority of the posts had captions (92.72%, $n = 395$) and were tagged with additional hashtags (98.36%, $n = 419$). Majority of the posts had promotional content (67.37%, $n = 287$). 39.38% ($n = 165$) of hashtags expressed some sort of emotion. Pregnant women's physical appearance was mentioned in 26.3% ($n = 112$) of the posts. Their appearance was commented on

in about one-fourth of the posts that had comments (26.12%, $n = 59$). Several posts mentioned physical beauty (27%, $n = 115$) and fashion (29.81%, $n = 127$). About one-fourth of the posts discussed fitness and health (23%, $n = 98$). Discussions about pregnancy and post-partum practices such as types of delivery, breastfeeding, etc., were rare (12.21%, $n = 52$).

Pregnancy Challenges

Pregnancy related challenges were rarely discussed (20.89%, $n = 89$). In posts with captions, 13.85% ($n = 59$) mentioned physiological challenges, 4.69% ($n = 20$) mentioned psychological challenges, and 0.7% ($n = 3$) mentioned social challenges. None of the posts discussed workplace related challenges.

Discussions about challenges and promotions were less likely to co-occur [$\chi^2(1) = 10.85$, $p = .001$]. Posts discussing challenges were associated with reference to fitness [$\chi^2(1) = 3.83$, $p = .05$], health [$\chi^2(1) = 12.57$, $p < .001$], weight [$\chi^2(1) = 34.85$, $p < .001$], and physical appearance [$\chi^2(1) = 4.69$, $p = .03$]. Posts with challenges were not associated with discussions about physical beauty [$\chi^2(1) = 3.51$, $p = .061$], fashion [$\chi^2(1) = 2.9$, $p = .09$], pregnancy practices [$\chi^2(1) = 3.5$, $p = .06$], or sexualized images [$\chi^2(1) = 2.89$, $p = .09$].

Promotions

Promotional posts were likely to co-occur with posts mentioning fashion [$\chi^2(1) = 13.79$, $p < .001$] and pregnancy practices [$\chi^2(1) = 8.01$, $p = .005$]. Promotional posts were not associated with posts mentioning beauty [$\chi^2(1) = 3.01$, $p = .08$], health [$\chi^2(1) = 2.9$, $p = .09$], fitness [$\chi^2(1) = .05$, $p = .82$], or sexualization [$\chi^2(1) = 1.28$, $p = .26$]. Promotional posts were less likely to co-occur with posts mentioning weight [$\chi^2(1) = 6.31$, $p = .01$] or physical appearance [$\chi^2(1) = 18.64$, $p < .001$].

Weight portrayal

Weight was rarely mentioned (5.4%, $n = 23$). Only 2.6% ($n = 11$) of captions and 3.52% ($n = 15$) of hashtags referred to the pregnant woman's weight. Most pregnant women shown in these posts were normal weight (92.37 %, $n = 218$). Underweight (2.12%, $n = 5$) and overweight (5.51%, $n = 13$) pregnant women were rare. Majority of weight related posts had a neutral tone (1.41%, $n = 6$). Positive (0.47%, $n = 2$) or negative (0.70%, $n = 3$) affect in weight related discussion were rare.

Discussion

This study examined pregnancy related content on Instagram. One of the primary reasons for exploring pregnancy portrayals on social media, aside from its popularity and reach, was that this format has the potential to generate a more holistic narrative of pregnancy, one representative of the real and varied experiences of being pregnant. Unfortunately, the notion that new media empowers users to share a more realistic narrative and challenge the ideals set by traditional media sources was not supported by this study. Instead, the portrayals echoed the idealistic themes of mainstream media. Pregnancy content on Instagram was also found to be heavily commercialized. It misrepresented what pregnant bodies look like and focused on the aesthetics rather than the functionality of a pregnant body. Its narrative was skewed toward positive experiences of pregnancy and ignored the practical struggles of being pregnant, work involved in sustaining a healthy pregnancy, or any negative experiences of pregnant women. These findings warrant caution in estimating the likely benefits of social media websites for pregnant women. The patterns of inaccurate depiction of pregnancy on Instagram found in this study make us less optimistic about the likely benefits of Instagram for pregnant women, unlike studies discussed previously that found support for benefits of other digital technologies and social media for pregnant women (Zhu et al., 2019; Chan & Chen, 2019).

I found that Instagram sets unrealistic expectations about the physical appearance of a pregnant body. Majority of pregnant women in these posts appeared to be normal weight even though majority of these posts were of third trimester pregnancies. This depiction is inaccurate because in 2014 about 50% of pregnant women in United States were overweight or obese even before getting pregnant (Branum et al., 2016). This study also found that discussions about weight were infrequent and rarely expressed negative emotions. This is consistent with other research findings such as a lack of discussions on weight and body dissatisfaction in depictions of celebrity pregnancies (Gow et al., 2012) and weight stigma in media portrayals of pregnancy (Nippert et al., 2021). These unrealistic depictions extended beyond weight portrayals, to other aspects of socially constructed ideals of feminine beauty. Almost all exposed bellies shown in these posts were without 'imperfections' such as stretch marks or linea nigra even though 60% to 90% of women have been found to develop stretch marks (Osman et al., 2007; Gabbe et al., 2016) and 90% have been found to develop some form of hyperpigmentation like linea nigra (Wong & Ellis, 1984) during pregnancy.

In addition to these obvious misrepresentations, Instagram also emphasized the aesthetics of a pregnant body over its active biological function and the challenges of a body going through pregnancy. A fourth of these posts show a perfect, exposed bump and some degree of sexual suggestiveness. More posts mentioned beauty, fashion, and physical appearance than any physical, psychological, social, or workplace challenges of being pregnant, pregnancy and post-partum practices such as types of deliveries, or fitness and health. Physical discomfort experienced during pregnancy got some attention (13.85% of captions, n = 59) but psychological challenges were rarely mentioned (4.69% of captions, n = 20). This portrayal downplays the stress that pregnancy puts on women and its consequences on their physical and mental well-

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being. Pregnancy is a stressful life event (Geller, 2004). According to a British study, 27% of pregnant women were found to have mental health disorders such as depression (11%), anxiety disorders (15%), eating disorders (2%), obsessive-compulsive disorder (2%), post-traumatic stress disorder (0.8%) and others (Howard et al., 2018). Such mental disorders during pregnancy have been found to be associated with post-partum mental health challenges. There is meta-analytical evidence that depression and anxiety disorders during pregnancy predict post-partum depression (Robertson et al., 2004). Van Bussel et al. (2006) corroborated this finding and concluded that although pregnant and post-partum women were not more vulnerable to mental health disorders compared to nonpregnant women, such disorders were common during pregnancy and post-partum. However, these mental health struggles of pregnant women were conspicuously absent from Instagram's narrative.

In this study, first trimester posts were rare. Some physiological challenges of pregnancy, such as morning sickness, peak in the first trimester. This potentially excludes the challenges of early months of being pregnant from Instagram's narrative. Also, since many couples wait to share pregnancy news until later, women may be more likely to turn to media for information seeking, making sense of their experiences, and seeking social support during their first trimester. The glamorized narrative of pregnancy presented to women on social media would likely further isolate pregnant women who are experiencing a difficult early pregnancy, especially if they do not have other means of social support. This lack of representation of early pregnancy is also concerning as past research discussed above shows that stage of pregnancy influences several body image related outcomes. For example, women have been found to have varied body image concerns at different stages of pregnancy (Moore, 1977; Inanir et al., 2015; Skouteris et al., 2005) and stage of pregnancy has been found to moderate state self-

objectification (Hopper & Aubrey, 2013). As pregnancy experiences and concerns vary across trimesters, Instagram may not fulfil certain needs of women in early pregnancy who seek social media for informational or social support.

These unrealistic ideals set by Instagram are problematic, more so because most of the posts examined in this study were from unverified accounts. Therefore, owing to decreased social distance, women might engage in greater social comparisons with pregnant women shown in these posts than, for example, pregnant celebrities. For women exposed to such media content, the ideals set by these portrayals might seem reasonably within reach, the narratives of pregnancy experiences echoed therein might appear more believable. Since the content supposedly comes from other women like themselves, the tendency to buy into these misrepresentations would be greater.

In addition to being unrealistic and overly positive, Instagram's pregnancy content is also heavily commercialization. It is geared toward selling a certain ideal pregnancy. Majority of the posts had promotional content and promotions were more likely to co-occur with posts that did not have a pregnant woman. Such posts without a pregnant woman were common, comprising almost half of all the posts. These kinds of posts generally had the product or service being promoted as the image instead of a pregnant woman's photograph. Promotions included products such as maternity fashion, jewelry, baby clothing, and post-partum care packages. It also included services such as maternity photoshoots, fitness training, pre and post-natal massage services, doula services. Several ads also promoted podcasts and social media influencers.

Promotional content co-occurred with fashion related posts. Posts mentioning maternity fashion were generally promotional in nature. So, it appears that expectations for women to dress fashionably are not entirely relaxed during pregnancy. Social norms around maternity clothing

have evolved from concealing to embracing and displaying the pregnant body (Nicolson et al., 2010). Now, social media is making pregnant bodies more public and visible, therefore, more open to scrutiny. Promoting fashion ideals for pregnant women will have implications on how pregnant women scrutinize themselves (thus, engaging in body surveillance and self-objectification) and are scrutinized by others. Promotional content was also found to co-occur with posts mentioning pregnancy practices suggesting that certain ways of doing pregnancy 'right' are also being promoted. This aligns with previous findings that women use Instagram to learn the right ways of being pregnant and buy the right products for it (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017).

Future research should examine the effects of these social media narratives on women. Media effects of such unrealistic portrayals may leave pregnant and postpartum women feeling inadequate. For women who have never been pregnant, these portrayals may provide an inaccurate idea of what pregnancy entails. The effects of heavily commercialized social media content are also largely unknown. One explanation for the findings in this study could be that Instagram, being a photo-sharing app, is not seen by women as the right space to discuss pregnancy struggles. Women might be using other text-heavy social media websites and online forums for discussing such issues. Still, the image sharing nature of Instagram did not encourage women to share struggles relevant to physical appearance or weight. So, maybe the findings are a consequence of social norms and ideals of modern pregnancy or Instagram's obsession with aesthetically pleasing content rather than a focus on images over text. Furthermore, since data was collected for this study (in early 2019), Instagram has moved away from being a photo-sharing app toward entertainment and video-sharing. According to Instagram leadership, it is now focusing on creators, video, shopping, and messaging. Clearly, Instagram is more openly

commercializing itself now than in 2019, with features allowing users to shop within the app. Future studies should examine if these new features have affected pregnancy related content on Instagram. For example, video formats may encourage women to share experiences of pregnancy not focused on their physical appearance, such as its challenges and struggles.

Conclusion

This study examined the representation of pregnancy on Instagram. Instagram mimics the idealistic portrayal of pregnancy in mainstream media. I found that social media depictions of pregnant bodies were inaccurate. Its portrayal of pregnancy was unrealistic for most women. Women who rely on such media for pregnancy related information or social support risk forming factually inaccurate expectations of pregnancy. The narrative mostly focused on positive aspects of pregnancy and ignored the challenges or negative experiences of pregnant women. Pregnant women chose to adhere to societal ideals of beauty in their self-presentation on Instagram and focused more on physical appearance than other more practical aspects of pregnancy. As pregnancy content on Instagram was heavily commercialized, women's decision to focus on appearance could be for greater social endorsements. Future research should explore pregnancy portrayals across such media with varied inbuilt features and effects of such portrayals on women. Also, examining the goals women seek when they create, share, or follow such content would clarify motivations behind some of the choices women make in their online self-portrayals and the effects that exposure to such portrayals could have on women's beliefs and well-being as well as their perceptions of acceptable narratives to share on social media.

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Table 4.1

Coding Scheme.

Variable	Description
Account type	Is the account verified? (Y/N)
Trimester of pregnancy	First, second, third, or not sure
Promotional content	Is a promotion or review for a product or service included in the post's image, caption, or hashtags? (Y/N)
Image content	Did the post include the baby's father, an ultrasound, other adults, children, pets, or food (each item was coded separately)? (Y/N)
Caption content	Does the caption include any references to physical appearance, fashion, fitness or exercise, health, or weight (coded separately)? (Y/N/NA)
Hashtag content	Is any fitness, health, beauty, fashion, or weight related hashtag present (coded separately)? (Y/N/NA)
Comment Content	Does the first comment mention something about the pregnant woman's appearance? (Y/N/NA)
Posts without a pregnant woman	Is a pregnant woman's body or face included in the image? (Y/N)
Exposure of the pregnant belly	Is the pregnant woman's belly covered? (Y/N/NA)
Appearance of the pregnant belly	Do you see any visible stretch marks or linea nigra (coded separately)? (Y/N/NA)

Variable	Description
Images without a visible face	Is the pregnant woman's face visible in the picture? (Y/N/NA)
Attire sexuality (sexual suggestiveness)	Does the pregnant woman's attire alone reflect a strong effort to flaunt her sexuality? (Y/N/NA)
Disrobing (sexual suggestiveness)	Is the picture indicative of the pregnant woman disrobing (removing clothing that reveals parts of the body not normally exposed)? (Y/N/NA)
Discreet nudity (sexual suggestiveness)	Is the picture indicative of the pregnant woman's discreet nudity (she is known to be nude, but no private parts of her body are shown)? (Y/N/NA)
Nudity (sexual suggestiveness)	Is the picture indicative of the pregnant woman's nudity (baring of normally private parts, such as buttocks or a woman's breasts)? (Y/N/NA)
Pregnancy challenges	Does the caption or hashtags include any references to the physiological, psychological, social, or work-related challenges of being pregnant (coded separately)? (Y/N/NA)
Pregnancy practices	Do the caption or hashtags include any references to pregnancy or post-partum practices such as types of deliveries, breastfeeding etc.? (Y/N/NA)
Emotions	Are any hashtags expressing emotions present? (Y/N/NA)
Weight portrayal	How does the pregnant woman's body, apart from her pregnant belly, look? (normal weight, underweight, overweight, NA)

Variable	Description
Weight affect	How does the caption describe the woman's feelings toward her weight? (neutral, positive, negative, NA)

Chapter 5. General Discussion

Chapter 5

General Discussion

In this dissertation, I examined women's self-portrayals on social media. Primarily two attributes, women's physical attractiveness and their assertiveness, were examined. Although societal norms require women to adhere to western beauty ideals, past research has shown mixed support for the beneficial effects of physical attractiveness on perceptions and judgements. Past research has identified contexts that render assertiveness beneficial or unfavorable for women (Carli, 1990; Carli, 2001; Reid et al., 2009). The objective of this dissertation was to clarify the influence of these two attributes on women's self-portrayals online and to explain the effects of gender normative expectations on outcomes such as women's persuasive power, social endorsement, and their preferences in online self-portrayals. In this discussion chapter, I summarize the key findings from the three studies into broad themes for women's online portrayals, discuss its relevance to the literature, and provide recommendations for future research.

Beauty Ideals and Sexism

Physical attractiveness takes prime focus in media portrayals of women. Self-portrayals of women on social media have been shown to mimic the patterns of depictions in traditional media (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). The three studies in this dissertation document the portrayals of feminine beauty on social media and the effects of such depictions on several outcomes. Findings from this dissertation demonstrate that adherence to feminine beauty standards is a cue that is interpreted by people differently based on their preexisting sexist beliefs. The first study revealed that benevolent sexism moderates the influence of women's physical attractiveness on their persuasiveness through likeability and perceptions about their

competence. For those who have moderate and low levels of benevolent sexism, physical attractiveness has a positive influence on persuasiveness through perceived competence. High levels of benevolent sexism were shown to be associated with similar effects through likeability. Findings from the second study show that women's physical attractiveness has a negative effect on sexism through perceived competence when women advocate for feminist issues. It is likely that by being beautiful, women compensate for violating norms when they argue for women's rights. Therefore, they inspire more favorable evaluations. These findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that the magnitude of sexist beliefs influence evaluations of women's physical attractiveness. Therefore, degree of sexist beliefs could be one of the factors that potentially explains some of the variance in the effects of physical attractiveness seen across studies. This corroborates other research that suggests a link between western beauty ideals and various forms of sexism (Forbes et al., 2007).

Findings from the first study also highlight how different forms of sexism operate differently against women. It adds to other recent findings that demonstrate specific ways in which benevolent sexism hurts women (Becker & Swim, 2011; Becker & Wright, 2011). While hostile sexism is more blatantly rejected and opposed, it is often the opposition to everyday sexism that is criticized as being whiny or overly sensitive. Some women distance themselves from labels such as "feminist" to avoid such connotations of being a troublemaker or someone who nags too much. However, since benevolent sexism occurs more frequently than hostile sexism (Oswald et al., 2019) and is less likely to inspire collective action (Becker & Wright, 2011), opposition to such forms of sexism is critical for gender equality.

Beauty Ideals and Life Events

This dissertation also explored if requirements of adherence to beauty ideals are relaxed to accommodate challenging life events such as pregnancy. Evidence from the third study shows that pregnant women on social media chose to adhere to social norms of beauty such as normal weight and flawless skin. The conversations about pregnancy are focused more on physical beauty and fashion than pregnancy challenges or pregnancy practices. Women also chose to portray their pregnant bodies in sexually suggestive ways. This could be interpreted as women's attempt to reclaim their bodies and their sexuality instead of accepting a more conservative performance of pregnancy. Contrarily, it could also imply that women are choosing to self-objectify for commercial profit, given the high frequency of promotional content, or social endorsement. This portrayal of an over-glamorized pregnancy is problematic because it sets unrealistic ideals and expectations much like the unattainable beauty ideals that media sets for women in general. While surveillance of pregnant bodies may have been restricted to discussions about celebrity pregnancies in gossip magazines and on entertainment TV channels, social media allows women to curate a near constant exposure to pregnancy content. Internalizing such body and beauty ideals is risky for pregnant women's health and well-being.

Assertiveness

Another attribute that receives gender normative treatment for women is assertiveness. Assertiveness is a masculine trait (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Feingold, 1994) and women report being less assertive than do men (Feingold, 1994). As being assertive violates gender role norms, it is evaluated negatively for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). The first two studies in this dissertation examined the effects of linguistic assertiveness on several outcomes. Findings from these studies demonstrated that assertive women are not always penalized. When other factors such as preexisting sexism and effects of mediators such as

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likeability were controlled, assertiveness had a positive direct effect on persuasiveness and negative direct effect on sexism. Findings in this dissertation do not corroborate past evidence in the literature that shows negative effects of women's linguistic assertiveness on their persuasiveness (Carli, 1990; Carli, 2001; Reid et al., 2009). These past studies show that assertiveness is more negatively evaluated by male participants and when gender identity is made salient. Although study two in this dissertation likely makes gender identity salient (as it concerns feminist demands), male participants did not evaluate assertiveness negatively compared to women who spoke tentatively. It is worth noting, though, that participants in both these studies found messages in tentative condition as moderately assertive. If any opinionated message from women is interpreted as assertive, that might explain the lack of significant differences in evaluation of assertive and tentative conditions in the first study. The findings in the second study, however, show that there are some positive consequences of women's assertiveness for persuasion and reducing sexism. Perhaps it is an indication of changing normative expectations from women.

Online Self-Portrayals of Women

Historically, women have used social media more than men. Although this gender gap has since reduced, women still use websites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest more than men (Anderson, 2015). Women's online presence empowers them to own their narratives. Women have been using this tool to bring attention to their issues (through movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp). This dissertation explored how women's self-portrayals online are linked to sexist norms and expectations. It also explored the effects of online feminism on women's well-being.

Women's online behaviors show adherence to societal norms of feminine beauty, either as a strategic choice or a consequence of internalized beliefs. Women's nod to feminine beauty ideals could be to seek social endorsements or for sections of social media that are commercialized, it could be a means to commercial profit. It is also possible that online self-portrayals are focused on aesthetics irrespective of the users' gender, or at least some websites such as Instagram and Pinterest place a greater premium on aesthetically pleasing imagery. Women's preference for these platforms, then, reflects some gendered differences in preferences for self-portrayals.

Online portrayals of the modern feminist woman seem to be evaluated through the lens of sexist beliefs and normative expectations of femininity. Consistent support for the indirect effect of women's physical attractiveness on outcomes such as their persuasive goals or degree of sexism they invoke, for both feminist (study 2) or gender-neutral (study 1) issues, shows that women's beauty matters. The moderating effect of benevolent sexism in these indirect processes is especially important if the sexist behaviors being called out online are not blatant forms of sexism such as harassment but the ones that are more subtle and unfortunately, more common.

Women's well-being, explored in this dissertation as their gender based collective self-esteem, was affected by the female author's physical beauty and assertiveness. When reading feminist messages from less attractive female authors, women felt less worthy as members of their gender group when the message was worded assertively than when it was tentative. Seeing a woman violate norms of femininity in her physical appearance and linguistic style made women feel less adequate as a woman. Maybe witnessing an emphatic, public demand for feminist rights by a woman defying multiple femininity norms makes women view forcefully denouncing sexist ideals and demanding feminist rights as a requirement for being a 'worthy

woman'. It is reasonable to expect that most women avoid violating too many gender norms simultaneously or making feminist demands too publicly or too forcefully. This could then be why they evaluated themselves more harshly than women who witnessed an author violating only one norm (not highly attractive but tentative in linguistic style).

Future Research

One key recommendation for future research, based on the findings from the first two studies, is to explore the varied effects of different types of sexism. It would allow us to better understand the individual threat posed by each kind and their varied resilience and receptiveness to different strategies for reducing sexism. It would also be useful to explore if online portrayals of women's issues adequately represent the different forms of sexism perpetrated against women.

One limitation of the studies in this research has been its reliance on linguistic elements to operationalize assertiveness. Both studies that tested for assertiveness effects found tentative messages to be perceived as moderately assertive. Future research should explore other effective means to operationalize assertiveness, without inflating time and cost requirements. This would also help in maintaining external validity given the evolving focus of online portrayals from texts and images to video formats.

Women's use of social media for feminist portrayals online should motivate more research on factors that enhance successful reception of such portrayals. If adherence to beauty norms has positive consequences for sexism, it could also influence other outcomes such as feminist identification. Research has explored the use of social media hashtags (#iamafeminist) in feminist identification (Kim, 2017) and the effects of feminist identification on feminist movements such as #MeToo (Kunst et al., 2019). Thus, future research should identify factors

that reduce stigma around feminist identification and assist in utilizing online tools to achieve the goals of modern feminism.

Further research should also explore the effects of these social media portrayals. These representations on social media may lead to greater social comparison as the women viewers see on social media, other than the celebrity influencers, would seem socially closer than the celebrities seen on traditional media. The effects of exposure to such social media content, for specific subgroups such as pregnant women, has not received much scholarly attention. It is important to understand the effects of such content in other subgroups too, especially vulnerable groups such as adolescent girls. Future research should, therefore, explore these effects for women in general and for specific subsets of the audience.

Conclusion

The studies in this dissertation show that social media mimics patterns typical of women's limited and stereotypical representation in traditional media and evaluations of women's messages on social media are not free from gendered expectations. Women's self-portrayal on social media was found to adhere to norms that require women to look feminine and beautiful. Even while going through pregnancy, a stressful life event for many women, the focus seemed to remain more on women's physical appearance than the physical and other challenges of being pregnant. By setting unrealistic standards for the ideal pregnant body and presenting an overly positive and heavily commercialized narrative around pregnancy, social media's portrayal of pregnant women replicated traditional media's limited representation of women going through pregnancy. These expectations of women to adhere to feminine beauty requirements, independent of life stage and situation, was not found to be challenged by women on social media. Although social media allows for a more democratic production of content, the value of

the content generated is still determined by the ideals dictated by social norms and expectations. Therefore, for greater endorsement on social media, women could be making choices that fulfill normative expectations such as beautiful self-presentation and overly optimistic narratives around experiences of female roles like childbearing and motherhood.

If the choice to adhere to requirements of physical beauty are motivated by a need for positive social evaluations, findings from this dissertation indicates that such a strategy is prudent for certain types of audience only. Women's physical attractiveness is more influential for people high in benevolent sexism. Adherence to such normative requirements of beauty would be a prudent strategy for enhancing persuasiveness through greater assessments of likeability and competence but only for a conservative audience. Women's physical beauty may have less influential power over those with more egalitarian gender views. For such people, assessments of a woman's competence and likeability as well as her persuasiveness would less likely be influenced by her adherence to social norms of feminine beauty. Findings from this dissertation also show that attractiveness has a negative indirect effect on sexism. Women who do not adhere to beauty ideals are likely to invoke greater sexism (through competence perceptions). It appears that women's compliance to gender norms results in comparatively lenient evaluation of feminist views. Possibly, women's nonconformity with beauty norms triggers negative stereotypes of feminist women and, thus, negative evaluations of feminist ideology.

The findings from this dissertation about assertiveness are somewhat optimistic. Evidence from the second study indicates that people report lower sexism when they are exposed to an assertive feminist message from a woman than when the message is tentative. One possible explanation is that this is indicative of evolving gender norms. It is also possible that evaluation

of women's assertiveness is topic specific. Perhaps assertiveness is tolerated more when women demand fair treatment and equality for their gender group as it is not seen as purely self-centered but advocacy on behalf of a vulnerable group. Past research shows that women are evaluated positively when they negotiate for others and negatively when they negotiate for themselves (Wade, 2001). These findings could also be an indication of increasing acceptance for women's public feminist assertions such as those made on social media. Maybe recent years of women assertively calling out sexism on social media has made assertiveness in the context of such public anti-sexist messages more acceptable. Even for conservative audience, it is possible that exposure to assertive feminist social media messages reminds them of online movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp and is somewhat fear or shame inducing and motivates them to distance themselves from sexist notions, resulting in lower reported sexism. Therefore, in case of assertiveness, social media does seem to be offering women an outlet to circumvent gendered expectations, at least when they talk about women's issues.

Overall, this dissertation suggests that social media is not yet living up to its promise as an alternative to the kinds of appearance emphasis we have long seen in traditional media. It does, however, point to some possible reasons for that; focusing on appearance still seems to pay off for women, in terms of greater influence through favorable assessments on traits such as liking and competence when interacting with people who subscribe to conservative gender beliefs. It is also a prudent strategy given that nonconformity was shown to instigate greater sexism. Furthermore, it may make sense for women to portray themselves as physically attractive on commercialized social media platforms that encourage focus on aesthetics to enhance audience reach and social endorsements such as likes and comments. Regarding assertiveness, at least for feminist topics, social media seems to offer some relief from backlash

for strong, assertive messages from women. Recent years of unapologetic public shaming of perpetrators of sexism has likely influenced how people evaluate strong anti-sexist messages on social media. This dissertation concludes that although social media offers some respite for women from gender normative expectations, it mostly echoes the themes found in the limited narratives of women's representations in traditional media.

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