

The Woman Next to Me: Pairing Powerful and Objectifying Representations of Women

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Previous research has documented negative effects of exposure to sexually objectifying media and positive effects of viewing women with more power and agency. The current study evaluates the effects of pairing these two types of representations of women on gender attitudes. Experimental stimuli were based on actual images from a student newspaper, where a statement from the new, female university president ran on the front page adjacent to a sexually objectifying ad. The experiment used a 2 (type of article) X 2 (type of ad) X 2 (gender) design to evaluate the independent and combined effects of viewing the statement from the president and the objectifying ad. Exposure to the objectifying ad was related to more attributional bias and marginally more stereotype production but was not related to hostile or benevolent sexism. Men who saw the objectifying ad alongside the president's statement rated the president as significantly less competent than other groups. Implications for the professional advancement of women are discussed, including the importance of context for media attention paid to female political figures.

In recent years, much scholarly and popular press attention has been directed at media representations of women who hold positions of power. The 2008 presidential election saw heavy media attention on two such women: Senator Hillary Clinton, a competitive candidate in the Democratic party primaries, and Governor Sarah Palin who served as the Republican vice presidential nominee. Throughout the campaigns and after, there existed a certain fascination among the media with these two women's appearance. A 2009 issue of *Newsweek*, for example, showcased Sarah Palin on the cover, wearing running shorts that exposed her legs. Critics on both ends of the political spectrum decried such representations as sexist, and scholars questioned whether such representations could diminish the political

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esteem in which the candidates were held. In a series of experiments, Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) provided an answer. Participants who were encouraged to focus on the appearance of a candidate like Palin subsequently rated her as less competent. Based on this information, candidates, their publicists, and journalists interested in equality might wish to avoid situations where powerful women are, themselves, sexually objectified. Still, given the frequent sexual objectification of women in media, it is likely that the most respectful, nonsexualizing representation of Clinton or Palin might still be published alongside images that characterize other women as sexual objects. How might these conflicting representations affect viewers' attitudes about the women depicted and women more generally? To answer this question, the current study uses an experimental design evaluating the effects of pairing objectifying representations of women with representations of women in positions of power.

Media Objectification and Evaluations of Women

When sexually objectified, women are treated as objects to be scrutinized and used for the pleasure of others (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In visual media, objectification takes many forms. Women may be portrayed in bikinis or lingerie, posed seductively, so that the viewer is directed to gaze at and evaluate the women's bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Mulvey, 1975). Body parts and objects may be shown as interchangeable or may be disconnected or disembodied, as if an object, a body, or a body part could sufficiently represent a woman (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983; Kilbourne, 1994). These various forms of sexual objectification share a common perspective on the subject as somehow less than a full person, with her own thoughts and abilities. Men, too, are subject to sexual objectification in the media, but not to the same extent as women. Examination of photographs in popular magazines and newspapers, for example, revealed that, when compared to photographs of men, photographs of women showed relatively less of the subject's face and relatively more of the subject's body (Archer et al., 1983).

A central problem with the rampant objectification of women is that, when objectified, women are denied their personhood (Loughnan et al., 2010; Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011). Recent research suggests that viewing sexually objectified images of women does not activate the cognitive processes typically invoked when thinking about humans, and instead activates cognitive processes typically reserved for objects (Bernard et al., 2012; Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2010). Perceiving women literally as "things" entails denying their morality, discounting their injuries, and devaluing their agency and abilities (Nussbaum, 1999). Consequently, when objectified, women may be evaluated more harshly. Loughnan et al. (2010) showed participants images of women that varied in the extent of their objectification (i.e. the prominence of the body relative to the face), and found that

participants could more comfortably imagine themselves harming the women who were more objectified. Similarly, when evaluating the competence of women in photographs, participants judged women in more objectifying photographs as less competent than women in photographs where the face was given more prominence (Archer et al., 1983; Schwarz & Kurz, 1989).

According to the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006; Fiske et al., 2002) perceptions of another person's humanity are directly tied to evaluations of that person in two core dimensions: warmth and competence. Social out-groups are typically denied one or both of these qualities, and recent evidence suggests that social groups perceived as lacking both warmth and competence (e.g., homeless people, drug addicts) are perceived as less than fully human (Harris & Fiske, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that when women are objectified, and thereby dehumanized, evaluations of their competence and warmth decline (Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010).

Implicit and Explicit Attitudes about Women

If a single viewing of an objectified woman can result in a negative evaluation of that woman's competence, how might viewing sexually objectified women affect attitudes and evaluation of other women? Previous research has demonstrated that brief exposure to positive or negative exemplars can activate corresponding implicit attitudes about the exemplars' social groups (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). Such implicit attitudes reflect automatic associations, and in the absence of other relevant information, such automatic reactions can form the foundation for explicit evaluations (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Consistent with this premise, research has demonstrated that brief exposure to stereotypical, but non-sexualized, media images of women can effect subsequent evaluations of other women (Kilbourne, 1990; Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, & Berkowitz, 1996; Rudman & Borgida, 1995). Using an experimental design, Rudman and Borgida (1995) demonstrated that, among men, brief exposure to sexist television ads primed the construct of "women as sexual objects." Once primed, the construct remained accessible during subsequent interactions with a female job candidate. Compared to controls, men who watched the sexist ads focused more on the interviewee's appearance and less on her qualifications, asserted more dominance and asked more sexualized questions during the interview, and evaluated the candidate as friendlier but less competent. The authors concluded that once the construct of women as sexual objects was activated by viewing sexist media, men tended to evaluate the job candidate specifically in relation to that construct, asking her questions that might confirm her status as a sexual object, and ultimately treating her like a sexual object.

Might exposure to objectifying images also affect individuals' explicit attitudes about women? Explicit attitudes require individuals to consider

various propositions and come to conclusions about their accuracy (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Repeated activation of implicit attitudes can result in change of explicit attitudes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), and survey research suggests that the tendency to objectify women is correlated with more general attitudes about women, including hostile and benevolent sexism (Swami et al., 2010; Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2002). Still, there is reason to expect that explicit attitudes might be more resistant to change than implicit attitudes. Propositional thought involving conscious reflection can lead individuals to reject their implicit reactions as inaccurate (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). In Dasgupta and Greenwald's (2001) experiment, brief media exposure led to shifts in participants' implicit but not explicit attitudes about social groups. Adults who have strongly held beliefs about gender, or other social groups, might be able to override their implicit reactions when responding to explicit statements.

Pairing Powerful and Objectifying Representations of Women

Despite the ubiquity of sexually objectified images of women, other representations of women do exist in the media, and counter-stereotypic images of women have the potential to result in more positive attitudes about women (for review, see Ward & Harrison, 2005). Still, the potential benefit of positive representations of women in the media is complicated by the likelihood that these representations will be viewed alongside more traditional, sexist representations. Rudman and Borgida's results indicate that viewing sexist media creates an "afterglow" that impacts subsequent interpersonal interactions with women, but this afterglow might also impact interactions with and interpretation of other media representations of women. Given the ubiquity of sexually objectifying media images, representations of women as powerful and agentic might be positioned among images of women as sexual objects.

As an example, in 2009, the school newspaper at a small Northern California university ran, on its front page, a statement from the new, female university president and next to it an ad featuring a sexually objectified woman. Many faculty and students complained about the placement of the objectifying advertisement right next to the statement from the president, arguing that the editorial decision was, at best, carelessly disrespectful and, at worst, blatantly and intentionally sexist. In response, the article quickly issued a replacement edition, in which the objectifying ad was removed. Among those faculty and students complaining about the ad, there was an assumption that the juxtaposition of these two images could have specific consequences for readers, that it might diminish the esteem in which readers held the president, or might generally promote sexist attitudes. The current study was designed to evaluate the validity of these assumptions, drawing specifically on the media representations included in the student article.

Using an experimental design, students were exposed to simulated newspaper pages in which they read an article, (either the statement from the female university president or a neutral article) which ran alongside an advertisement (either sexually objectifying or neutral). After reading the newspaper page, students completed various measures of implicit and explicit attitudes about gender. Additionally, participants who read the statement from the president rated her competence and warmth.

It was hypothesized that viewing the objectifying ad would result in more traditional gender attitudes, whereas viewing the president's statement would result in less traditional gender attitudes. Drawing from the work of Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001), it was expected that effects would be stronger for implicit gender attitudes than for explicit gender attitudes. Furthermore, based on the work of Rudman and Borgida (1995), it was hypothesized that viewing the president's statement alongside the objectifying ad might lead participants to evaluate the president in relation to the broader belief that women are and ought to be sexual objects. Consequently, it was expected that participants who viewed the objectifying ad would evaluate the president's competence more negatively than participants who viewed a neutral ad. Because Rudman and Borgida's sample included only men, hypotheses regarding women's evaluation of the president were more speculative.

Method

Participants

The sample included 186 undergraduate and graduate students, who were recruited from a small university in Northern California. Students were recruited from 17 different classes in nine different departments, spanning the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 57 ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 4.4$). Sixty percent of participants were female. The ethnic composition of the sample reflected the diversity of the campus generally, with 35% of participants identifying as Caucasian, 27% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 18% as Latino/a, 5% as African-American, and 15% identifying as belong to another or multiple ethnic groups.

Materials

Four newspaper pages were created for the study, based on actual content that had run in the university's student newspaper. Each newspaper page showed the school paper's banner, which included its name, the volume and issue number, and the date. Below the banner, each page included one central article, one advertisement, and the beginning of a second article about campus activities.

Students were randomly assigned to one of four conditions determining the content of the article and the advertisement on the page they were given. Students received one of two articles: a statement from the new, female university president or a neutral article. The statement from the president welcomed parents who were attending the upcoming parents' weekend, discussed upcoming events, and briefly outlined some of the president's priorities for the coming semester. The statement was accompanied by a photograph of the president standing outside a campus building. The neutral article described a recent minor flood that had taken place in one of the residence halls. The article included photographs of damaged portions of the building and described the causes and consequences of the flood. Next to the article, each page included one of two advertisements: an objectifying ad or a neutral ad. Both were advertisements for a local clothing store that specialized in designer jeans. The objectifying ad featured a young woman wearing jeans and a bikini top, lying on a bed and looking over her shoulder at the camera. The neutral ad featured images of jeans with the statement, "We've got your denim identity!" This ad did not include any images of people.

The two articles and two ads resulted in a total of four newspaper pages, featuring (1) the statement from the president alongside the objectifying ad, (2) the statement from the president alongside a neutral ad, (3) the neutral article about the flood alongside the objectifying ad, and (4) the neutral article alongside the neutral ad. The advertisements and articles were altered slightly from their original publication form so that each would occupy approximately the same amount of space in the layout of all four pages.

Procedure

Participants were recruited at the beginning or end of a scheduled class period. Students were told that the study was investigating effective communication through newspapers. After completing a consent form, participants were randomly assigned to conditions and given one of the four packets. The first page of the packet was a cover page describing the study. The second page of the packet was one of the four newspaper pages. Participants were instructed that they should read the central article but could disregard any other content in the article.

After reading the newspaper page, participants were instructed to turn the page and complete the remaining survey items in the packet. In addition to reporting on basic demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and parental education, participants completed several measures of implicit and explicit gender attitudes. Measures included in the survey packet are described below, and all measures of implicit attitudes were completed prior to measures of explicit attitudes. After completing the survey packet, participants were instructed to turn the packet into one of the research assistants in the hall. At this point, participants were informed of the intent of the study. Participants in all conditions were shown the newspaper

page featuring the statement from the president and the objectifying ad as it had actually run 2–3 weeks prior. They were asked if they had seen this issue of the paper or if they had discussed it with friends or classmates. As several classes had discussed the objectifying ad when it came out, many students indicated that they had already seen or discussed this particular issue. Initially, 343 students were recruited and completed the packet. Students who had previously seen or discussed the issue (46%) marked on their packet that they had seen or discussed it, and were excluded from all analyses, resulting in 186 participants. To avoid contaminating participants before they completed the survey packets, participants were excluded after random assignment to condition, which resulted in an uneven distribution of participants across the experimental conditions.

Measures

Ratings of competence and warmth. Participants who read the statement from the president were asked to rate the president, based on 10 characteristics. These characteristics were designed to reflect the dimensions of warmth and competence, which figure prominently in perceptions and stereotypes of others (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006). For each characteristic, participants were asked to rate the extent to which the adjective accurately described the president from 0 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*). Five adjectives (*competent, capable, competitive, independent, and intelligent*) reflected competence and five adjectives (*caring, compassionate, likeable, warm, and welcoming*) reflected warmth. Participants who read the article about the flood were not asked to rate the president, and instead were asked to rate a typical student at their university along the same dimensions. Data were only used, however, from participants who read the president's statement and rated her competence and warmth. Analyses indicated that a three-item version of the competence scale, including *competent, capable, and intelligent*, had higher internal reliability ($\alpha = .83$) than the full five item version ($\alpha = .77$). This pattern may indicate that, among these students, competition and independence were not seen as important indicators of competence for a university president. Accordingly, an average score was created across the three items with higher scores indicating more positive ratings of the president. A similar score was created averaging the five items assessing warmth ($\alpha = .89$), with higher scores indicating more positive ratings of the president.

Implicit gender attitudes. To assess participants' implicit gender attitudes without making participants aware of the study's focus on gender, we used sentence stems generated by von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, and Vargas (1997). These sentence stems included individuals with male and female names engaging in tasks that are stereotypically male, stereotypically female, or stereotypically neutral. Three stems featured a female name and a stereotypically feminine task (e.g.,

“Shirley asked for help getting home”), three stems featured a female name and a stereotypically masculine task (e.g., “Joanne directed the operation”), three stems featured a male name and a stereotypically feminine task, (e.g., “Jeff sewed the button back on”) three stems featured a male name and stereotypically masculine task (e.g., “Bob confronted the man”), and four distractor stems featured male and female names engaging in gender neutral tasks (e.g., “Sam read the newspaper”). Participants were instructed that these stems formed the beginning of sentences and that they should add words to complete each sentence. They were informed that they could create any kind of sentence as long as it was grammatically correct.

Responses to the sentence stems were coded in two ways, resulting in two variables, Attributional Bias and Use of Stereotypes, each of which will be explained in detail below. First, drawing from the work of von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, and Vargas (1997), completions were coded as being explanatory or nonexplanatory. Because individuals may feel a need to explain behaviors that are inconsistent with expectancies, individuals with strong gender bias are more likely to offer explanatory completions for stereotype incongruent events (e.g., a male engaging in stereotypically female task), compared to individuals with weaker gender biases (von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas). Coders, who were masked to the participants condition status, coded all sentence completions as explanatory (1) if the completion provided a reason or justification why the actor was engaging in the behavior described, and as nonexplanatory (0) if no reason or justification was provided. After coders trained on a subset of completions, each completion was double coded. Coders agreed on 96% of completions, and met to discuss and resolve any disagreements. Sums were then created for stereotype congruent stems and stereotype incongruent stems. An attributional bias score was created by subtracting the explanatory scores for congruent stems from the explanatory score for incongruent stems. Higher scores indicated stronger attributional bias and accordingly reflect more traditional gender role attitudes.

After coding the sentence completions for attributional bias, coders coded the same completion for the presence of traditional stereotypes about men and women. Similar to the work of Logel et al. (2009), coders evaluated whether the sentence completions contained stereotypes about the roles, characteristics, status, or sexual objectification of men or women. Completions were coded as either stereotypical, (e.g., *Joanne directed the operation . . . thus it failed epically*), neutral (*Joanne directed the operation . . . yesterday*), or counterstereotypical (*Joanne directed the operation . . . and successfully captured the criminal*). After coders trained on a subset of completions, each completion was double coded. Coders agreed on 95% of completions, and met to discuss and resolve any disagreements. Completions coded as stereotypical were given a score of 1, as neutral were given a score of 0, and as counterstereotypical were given a score of -1. A sum scores was created, with higher scores reflecting greater use of gender stereotypes.

Explicit gender attitudes. After the sentence completion task, participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI–Glick & Fiske, 1996). On the ASI, participants are asked to indicate how much they agree with 22 statements on a 6-point likert scale from 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). Eleven items, such as “women seek to gain power by getting control over men,” reflect hostile sexism, and eleven items, such as “women should be cherished and protected by men,” reflect benevolent sexism. Reverse score items were rescaled and averages were created for each subscale with higher scores reflecting greater hostile sexism ($\alpha = .85$) or benevolent sexism ($\alpha = .80$).

Results

Means and standard deviations for the six outcome variables are shown in Table 1. The first aim of this study was to examine whether viewing the objectifying ad alongside the statement from the president would impact students’ evaluations of the president. Attitudes about the president’s competence and warmth were assessed only among those students who read the statement from the president. A 2 (type of ad) X 2 (gender) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) was run, with two dependent variables: ratings of competence and ratings of warmth. There was no main effect for gender ($F(2,94) = .22, p = .80, \eta^2 = .01$) or for viewing the objectifying ad ($F(2,94) = 1.37, p = .26, \eta^2 = .03$), however there was a significant interaction between viewing the objectifying ad and gender ($F(2,94) = 4.23, p = .02, \eta^2 = .08$). The test of between subject effects indicated that the interaction was significant for ratings of the president’s competence ($F(1,95) = 8.55, p = .004, \eta^2 = .08$),¹ but not for ratings of her warmth ($F(1,95) = 2.15, p = .15, \eta^2 = .02$). To further investigate the nature of this interaction, separate t-tests were run for male and female participants. Among women, there was no effect of viewing the objectifying ad on ratings of the president’s competence ($t(109) = -1.45, p = .15, d = .28$). Among men, however, there was a significant effect of viewing the objectifying ad ($t(109) = 2.24, p = .03, d = .53$), such that men who viewed the objectifying ad rated the president as significantly less competent compared to men who saw the neutral ad.

The second aim of this study was to examine whether viewing the objectifying ad and the statement from the president would impact students’ implicit and explicit attitudes. A 2 (type of article) X 2 (type of ad) X 2 (gender) MANOVA was run, with four dependent variables: attributional bias, indirect gender stereotypes, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. Analyses revealed a main effect for gender,

¹ When the full 5-item measure of competence was used, the interaction between type of ad and gender was only marginally significant ($F(2,94) = 2.48, p = .08, \eta^2 = .05$). The between subjects effect for the interaction between type of ad and gender on competence was still significant ($F(1,95) = 4.61, p = .034, \eta^2 = .05$)

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Explicit and Implicit Attitudes, Separated by Gender and Condition

Article	Women						Men					
	President			Neutral			President			Neutral		
	Objectifying N = 30	Neutral N = 32	Neutral N = 32	Objectifying N = 17	Neutral N = 32	Neutral N = 32	Objectifying N = 20	Neutral N = 20	Neutral N = 20	Objectifying N = 16	Neutral N = 20	Neutral N = 20
Ratings												
COMP	4.12 (.71)	3.89 (.71)	-	-	-	-	3.75 (.79)	4.37 (.61)	-	-	-	-
WARM	4.07 (.84)	4.09 (.69)	-	-	-	-	3.79 (.73)	4.28 (.82)	-	-	-	-
Implicit												
A. BIAS	-.34 (.68)	-.71 (.70)	-	-.25 (.77)	-.65 (.73)	-	-.19 (.48)	-.45 (.76)	-	-.57 (.70)	-.63 (.87)	-
STEREO	1.14 (1.25)	1.13 (1.34)	1.65 (1.11)	1.65 (1.11)	1.22 (1.43)	1.59 (1.37)	1.59 (1.37)	1.90 (1.41)	1.53 (2.29)	1.26 (.99)	1.26 (.99)	1.26 (.99)
Explicit												
HS	1.90 (.79)	2.14 (.94)	1.87 (.75)	1.87 (.75)	2.13 (.86)	2.66 (.59)	2.66 (.59)	2.30 (1.06)	2.35 (1.02)	2.60 (.80)	2.60 (.80)	2.60 (.80)
BS	2.10 (.77)	2.26 (.29)	2.60 (.84)	2.60 (.84)	2.50 (.91)	2.76 (.89)	2.76 (.89)	2.33 (.84)	2.63 (.90)	2.61 (.79)	2.61 (.79)	2.61 (.79)

Note. COMP = Ratings of the president's competence; WARM = Ratings of the president's warmth; A. BIAS = Attributional bias; STEREO = Indirect stereotypes; HS = hostile sexism; BS = benevolent sexism.

$F(4,160) = 2.55, p = .04, \eta^2 = .06$. Specifically, men reporting significantly more hostile sexism than women, $F(1,163) = 10.17, p = .002, \eta^2 = .06$, but no other gender differences were significant. There was no effect for viewing the president's statement, $F(4,160) = 1.56, p = .19, \eta^2 = .04$. There was, however, a significant effect for viewing the objectifying ad, $F(4, 160) = 3.23, p = .01, \eta^2 = .08$. Specifically, participants who viewed the objectifying ad responded with higher attributional bias $F(1,163) = 5.87, p = .02, \eta^2 = .04$, and marginally but not significantly more indirect stereotypes $F(1,163) = 3.85, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$. The objectifying ad did not have a significant effect on hostile sexism $F(1,163) = 0.45, p = .52, \eta^2 < .01$, or benevolent sexism $F(1,163) = 0.51, p = .48, \eta^2 < .01$. None of the interaction terms were significant.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of viewing media representations of women in powerful positions alongside representations of women as sexual objects. Our results reveal a somewhat mixed pattern of effects. First, exposure to a short statement from a female university president had no effect on participants' gender attitudes. Past research has indicated that exposure to media casting women in non-traditional roles can reduce girls' and women's reliance on gender stereotypes (Ward & Harrison, 2005). Our results suggest that a single exposure, such as the one used in our experiment, may not be sufficient to affect gender attitudes. Exposure to a single objectifying advertisement, however, did influence gender attitudes. Although the ad did not affect participants' responses to a standard measure of explicit gender attitudes, it did affect how participants completed sentence stems about fictional men and women. Exposure to the objectifying ads was related to more attributional bias. That is, participants who saw the objectifying ad showed a stronger tendency to expect people to conform to traditional gender stereotypes and to expect justification when those stereotypes were broken. Participants who saw the ad were also marginally more likely to reproduce gender stereotypes when completing the sentence stems. Additionally, men who viewed the president's statement alongside the objectifying ad, rated the president as significantly less competent than did men who saw the neutral ad. Among women, viewing the objectifying ad did not significantly impact ratings of the president's competence.

The fact that effects emerged only for the more implicit measures of gender attitudes is consistent with the findings of Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001). Moreover, it is consistent with the differentiated processes underlying implicit and explicit attitudes. Implicit attitudes reflect automatic associations. When primed with an objectifying image, a specific schema may become more readily accessible. This schema could then be utilized when participants respond to ambiguous, fictional sentence stems. Importantly, however, responding to the sentence stems did not require participants to evaluate the validity of various propositions about

gender. So for example, when faced with the sentence stem “Joanne directed the operation,” a participant who had an easily accessible construct of women as sexual objects might finish the sentence with the phrase, “because her boss was out of town.” When asked to reflect explicitly on the relative competence of men and women in the workplace, however, the same participant might come to the conclusion that men and women are equally competent.

These processes may also explain why men and women exposed to the objectifying ad rated the president’s competence differently. Evaluating the president’s competence required participants to leave the realm of the hypothetical and provide an accurate assessment of a real person. While engaging in this type of propositional thought, individuals might rely on their currently accessible associations, but might also consider other relevant propositions. To the extent that other propositions conflict with the implicit response, conscious reflection might result in the suppression of initial implicit biases (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Women, who in this sample reported lower levels of hostile sexism, might have been especially motivated to engage in more conscious reflection and to suppress their implicit biases when evaluating the president’s competence. Men, on the other hand, may have engaged in less conscious reflection while evaluating the president or may have experienced less conflict between their implicit responses and their espoused convictions. Consistent with the findings of Rudman and Borgida (1995) viewing the objectifying ad may have activated a specific construct emphasizing an objectified ideal of femininity. Once activated, this construct may have provided a context for the president’s statement, encouraging the men to consider the president in relation to this objectified femininity. Evaluating the president in this context may have caused the men to focus on her appearance and femininity rather than her qualifications, and consequently led men to evaluate her competence more negatively.

The current study has several limitations that should be considered. The current study used actual pages from the campus newspaper, and while this may have made the experience more relevant and realistic for the participants, it also required excluding a large subset of participants from data analysis. Additionally, the neutral article, which was also pulled from an actual issue of the paper, did not fully mirror the statement from the president in tone and content. Future research should attempt to replicate findings from the current study with wholly simulated pages. This would permit greater control of the experimental manipulation and the distribution of participants across condition.

This study also focused on evaluations of a relatively unknown figure, a university president in her first months in the position. Students may have had little exposure to the president prior to the study, and accordingly may have had relatively little information on which to base their evaluations. As a result, students may have relied on gender stereotypes to fill in the gaps in their own knowledge. Students also might not see a newly hired female president as an especially powerful figure. Accordingly, these findings may apply primarily to women in the

early stages of their career or who are less well-known and may not generalize to attitudes about well-known public figures. Future research could examine whether the effects found in the current study extend to well-known figures and also to completely unknown figures. Similarly, the current study focused only on media images of women, because the objectification of women is much more prevalent than the objectification of men. Still, men are objectified in the media and future research could examine whether findings from the current study might extend to media representations of men. It should also be noted that effect sizes were generally small, as might be expected when examining the effects of a single exposure to a specific media image. Additional research is necessary to examine the cumulative effects of repeated exposures to objectifying and powerful representations of women over time. Despite these limitations, the current study offers some new insight into media effects on implicit and explicit gender attitudes, indicating that pairing competing representations of women, one that shows women as powerful and one that shows women as objectified, can have a distinct impact on men's evaluation of the women shown and on men's and women's implicit attitudes about women more generally.

This study was inspired by a specific event on a college campus in which the profile of an important female figure was placed into a context that included sexually objectifying images. This event is routinely reproduced in mass media representations of women, and, accordingly, the results of the current study have important implications for those hoping to reduce gender stereotypes in general and also for those seeking to reduce barriers to women's educational and professional attainment. Past research suggests that increased media attention to women in nontraditional roles may help to reduce adherence to gender stereotypes. Such representations could take many forms, including news stories about women in politics or industry, movie characters who defy stereotypes, or television coverage of women's sporting events. Increasing such representations may contribute to changing attitudes about women, however, findings from the current study suggest that it may be especially important to consider the context of such representations. Consider, for example, media representation of female athletes. In the decades since the 1972 passage of Title IX, women's participation in sports has increased dramatically, but media coverage of female athletes has lagged behind (Daniels, 2012). When the media do focus on female athletes, images frequently sexualize and objectify the athletes. Research has shown that exposure to such objectifying images can result in negative outcomes, but it has also shown that exposure to images of female athletes actively playing their sports can lead to positive outcomes (Daniels, 2009, 2012; Daniels & Wartena, 2011). A reasonable conclusion of such studies is that increasing the representation of female athletes playing their sports may be a productive strategy toward increasing gender equity in sports. If findings from the current study were to generalize to athletics, however, this would suggest that those interested in gender equity in sports and education must be concerned

not just with getting positive stories out, but with where those stories are placed. Stories about female athletes and other women in positions of power may backfire when shown alongside traditional, objectifying images. Women portrayed in these contexts may be judged to be less competent by men, which could hinder the academic, athletic, or professional achievement of the women shown.

Applied to the political sphere, these results suggest that the broader culture of sexual objectification may place female candidates at a distinct disadvantage. Given the frequent objectification of women in media, a profile of a female candidate in a popular magazine or on a television news program could easily be preceded or followed by a sexually objectifying ad or program, which could, in turn, result in lower ratings of the candidate's competence. Accordingly, even when female candidates, themselves, are presented in positive and nonobjectifying ways, the broader culture of sexual objectification may still present barriers to the professional advancement of women. The results of the current study highlight the importance of considering context when studying media effects of objectification and underscore the need for additional research in this area.

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