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A Sexy Post a Day Brings the "Likes" Your Way: A Content Analytic Investigation of Sexualization in Fraternity Instagram Posts

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Abstract

Fraternities and sororities are popular organizations within university life. Even though their activities are usually secretive and protected, social media offer a chance for the public to understand these groups. In the present study, we investigated how sexualization is communicated on fraternities' location pages on Instagram. Applying a multi-dimensional coding scheme composed of 12 sexualization variables, we analyzed 600 Greek life posts from 49 fraternities. Among the posts, we found (a) body shots, (b) revealing clothing, (c) sexualized mouths, and (d) breasts/chests to be the most frequently used sexualization cues. In addition, there was a positive association between the number of sexualization cues in a post and the number of likes the post received. The results also point to gender differences: fraternity posts portraying only women included a greater number of sexualization cues, on average, than posts showing only men or mixed genders. Also, gender of individuals in the pictures moderated the relationships between sexualized mouths/buttocks and likes. Implications for gender inequality and risks of sexualization are discussed.

Keywords Sexualization · Fraternities · Gender · Instagram · Social media

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Introduction

Fraternities and sororities, also known as Greek letter organizations, are popular groups on university campuses. Although they are purported to offer "camaraderie, secrecy, and intellectual discussion to [their] members," their activities have been dominated by partying, alcohol, and sex since the 1940s (DeSantis, 2007, p. 3). In fact, the hypermasculinity of men and the sexualization of women are two prominent themes established in Greek life culture. Fraternities commonly endorse highly masculine characteristics, including physical and sexual aggression (Iwamoto et al., 2014; Sweeney, 2014). In order to affirm their masculine status, fraternity members seek to perpetuate their values by being accepting of the objectification of women (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Davis, 2018; Seabrook et al., 2018), engaging in sexual deception to attract women and condoning physical and sexual violence against them (Kimmel, 2018; Sanday, 2007; Seabrook et al., 2018). A meta-analysis found that fraternity membership is associated with rape-supportive attitudes and sexually aggressive behavior (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). In tandem with this, sorority members are expected to be highly feminine (Sweeney, 2014). In fact, sororities use appearance as one of the criteria for new members and are proud of their members' "exceptional physical appearance" (Freeman, 2018, p. 128).

Even though Greek letter organizations and their activities are often kept secret and protected by members (DeSantis, 2007), social media provide a unique opportunity for the public to view their culture. Fraternities and sororities have begun to use social media as a newsfeed to promote internal news and engage their users on a more personal level (Taylor & McArdle, 2018). Yet, little is known about whether sexualization—one prevailing feature of Greek culture—is reflected in social media. Although scholars have found fraternities degrading women through sexualization, it is unclear whether they do so online. Because social media have the potential to reach a wide audience, and because sexualization of women has been associated with detrimental outcomes for fraternity members (e.g., acceptance of sexual violence and endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes; Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Seabrook et al., 2018), it is worth studying the enactment of sexualization on social media.

We consider Instagram as an ideal platform to understand this question for four reasons. First, Instagram is most popular among 18- to 24-year-olds (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), making it a relevant platform to investigate college students' Greek life experiences. Second, Instagram is a highly visual social media platform (Marengo et al., 2018) that enables users to express different aspects of their life through self-generated pictures (Michikyan et al., 2015). These photos directly showcase to the public who the group is and promote their prominent values, ideals, and beliefs. Third, Instagram is a more sexualized environment for female college students than other social media applications, including Facebook (Ramsey & Horan, 2018). Lastly, social feedback on Instagram, in the form of "likes," can facilitate the understanding of whether sexualization is encouraged.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is threefold. First, the study documents how sexualization is visually communicated in fraternity Instagram posts.

Furthermore, recognizing long-standing gender inequality in the context of Greek life (Sweeney, 2014), we explore how sexualization differs by the gender presentation of individuals in the photos. Finally, using the number of likes as an indicator of positive feedback on Instagram, we assess the relationship between sexualization cues and their quantitative feedback (i.e., "likes") to determine whether sexualization is endorsed by the audiences of fraternity pages.

Sexualization

Sexualization calls attention to one's sexuality and is conceptualized to take place in the following scenarios:

> (1) a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; (2) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; (3) a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; (4) and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 1)

Although sexualization can occur from interpersonal experiences, media are an abundant source of sexualizing messages (American Psychological Association, 2007; Ward, 2016). Social media provide ways of presenting the self (e.g., profile photos, selfies) in accordance with mediated depictions of sexualization. Researchers found that the need for popularity, desire for attention, and perceived prevalence of other users' engagement in sexualization are all associated with posting sexualized pictures on social network sites (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Ramsey & Horan, 2018). Kapidzic and Herring (2014) found that 37.3% of the profile photos on a teen chat site demonstrated revealing clothing or partial nudity. Another study showed that roughly 20% of the female profile photos focused on displaying the body on MySpace (e.g., wearing revealing clothing, swimsuits; Hall et al., 2012).

Even though sexualization in social media has received research attention, only a few studies have examined fraternities' sexualization behaviors on Instagram. We found two studies particularly relevant in this regard. First, Davis's (2018) textual analysis examined 600 posts from two Instagram accounts—*Four Year Party* and *College Nationwide*—and found that objectification and submissiveness of women were two dominant themes within college experiences. Second, Rodriguez and Hernandez (2018) focused on an Instagram account called *TFM Girls* (Total Frat Move) and discovered that this account presented sexualized and objectified women, most of whom were White, thin, and big-chested. In line with this research, we apply a multi-dimensional coding scheme composed of 12 sexualization variables and ask:

> **RQ**: How is sexualization portrayed through fraternity Instagram posts (i.e., photos and captions)?

Sexualization of Women in Fraternities

In regard to Greek life, a history of sexualization of women is well-established in the literature. Fraternities are characterized by aggressive heterosexuality, and their members "use and abuse" women to demonstrate their masculinity (Syrett, 2009, p. 5). For example, women are usually sexualized and subordinate to men at Greek life house parties, and heavy consumption of alcohol further increases the likelihood of reckless behavior and sexual assault at the parties (Armstrong et al., 2006). In addition, women are treated as servers, sexual prey, and bait to attract new members into Greek life culture (Martin & Hummer, 1989). The evidence can be seen in the case of Little Sisters, who are not fully-fledged members of the fraternities but are involved in service activities (Stombler, 1994). On the one hand, fraternities expect Little Sisters to be confidants and supporters for social events. On the other hand, fraternities constantly objectify and commodify Little Sisters, particularly during rush week, when Little Sisters are treated as a type of capital attracting new members.

Fraternity men, relative to non-fraternity members, sexualize women more often (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Murnen, 2000; Seabrook et al., 2018). For instance, fraternity members applied more degrading terms when describing women's genitals and posted more images of sexualized women in their rooms than non-fraternity students (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Murnen, 2000). Seabrook et al. (2018) also found that being a fraternity member was associated with the objectification of women. In light of these long-standing Greek culture values, we expect that sexualization will be more prominently displayed in Instagram pictures featuring women, as compared to pictures featuring men or mixed genders.

H1 Fraternity Instagram posts that include only women will have more sexualization than those that include only men or mixed genders.

Sexualization and the Number of Likes

Peer endorsement of one's public identity construction can be encouraging for one's sense of self. This is especially relevant on Instagram, where the ability to "like" another person's photos is readily available. The simple click of the "like" button can serve as a quantifiable form of social approval from one's peers, validating and reaffirming one's public identity (Mascheroni et al., 2015; Sherman et al., 2016). On highly visual platforms, feedback on images of oneself may be perceived as evaluations of one's attractiveness and potentially even personality and success (Mascheroni et al., 2015). Burrow and Rainone (2017) found that the number of likes on Facebook profile pictures was positively correlated with profiler owners' self-esteem. Likes can also subsequently affect one's social media behaviors to bring in continued peer endorsement (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2016; Sherman et al., 2016). For instance, the desire for popularity, especially in

adolescents, motivates individuals to strategically present themselves in order to appear more popular to peers (Santor et al., 2000; Utz et al., 2012).

Research has suggested connections between sexualized pictures and the number of likes. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) found that even when there is a low frequency of sexualized photos in a user's Instagram account, the sexualized pictures tend to be the most popular in terms of likes and comments. Because sexualization is a popular component of Greek life, a relationship between sexualization cues and likes in social media posts should be evident.

H2 Fraternity posts with a greater number of sexualization cues will garner a higher number of likes on Instagram.

As argued previously, fraternity members sexualize women's bodies to assert their masculine status and dominance, and this norm is established and approved within the group (e.g., Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Davis, 2018; Seabrook et al., 2018). Accordingly, we posit that gender will moderate the relationship between sexualization and the number of likes. Specifically, we predicted that depicting women's sexualized body parts would be endorsed and praised in the form of likes on Instagram. Some research, indeed, has found that higher levels of women's sexualization garner more likes on social media (Bell et al., 2018; Ramsey & Horan, 2018). Moreover, Rodriguez and Hernandez (2018) demonstrated that likes/comments were positively associated with women's breasts size in *TFM Girls'* Instagram posts. In sum, because fraternity culture encourages the sexualization of women's bodies, we hypothesize:

H3 Gender will moderate the relationship between sexualized body parts in fraternity posts and the number of likes received. Specifically, sexualized body parts in women-only posts will garner more likes on Instagram than sexualized body parts in men-only or mixed-gender posts.

Method

Sample

To construct the sampling frame, we used a website called Greekrank.com. This website maintains anonymous rankings of fraternities and sororities in the United States. We were not interested in the rankings, but the records of all fraternities in the United States were useful to us. In November 2019, this website listed 819 U.S. and Canadian colleges and universities (hereafter referred to as universities) that either had fraternities, sororities, or both affiliated with them. We considered this list to be the sampling frame.

Based on an a priori power analysis (effect size $w = 0.12$, alpha $= 0.05$, power $= 0.80$, $df = 2$, chi-square), our goal was to obtain approximately 600 photos to have adequate power to address our RQ and hypotheses. Because we decided to

include five photos from each fraternity, we planned to randomly choose 120 universities, which would represent 14.7% of the sampling frame.

In order to be retained into the sample, a university had to have at least one fraternity affiliated with it. Upon our initial sampling, we found that six universities could not be included in the sample because they did not have any ranked fraternities, only sororities. Next, we randomly selected one of the ranked fraternities associated with the university. On Greekrank.com, the rankings of fraternities are based on anonymous users' ratings on seven criteria: friendliness, popularity/dominance, campus/community involvement, classiness, fun/social life, brotherhood, and tier. Our reasoning for using ranked fraternities was that if the fraternity was among those ranked at a given university, it would likely be a popular fraternity that contributes to the culture of its university.

We then searched for a publicly available Instagram page for that fraternity's location. A location page contains public photos and videos that were shared with the fraternity's address. We used location pages because they collect geo-tagged posts showing what happens at specific places. If the fraternity did not have such a page, we randomly chose another fraternity associated with the university. If none of the fraternities associated with the university had a public Instagram page, then we omitted that university from the sample and replaced it with another university. This occurred in 46 cases.

Finally, once we selected a fraternity's Instagram location page into the sample, we randomly chose five of the fraternity's photos from their "top posts." We only chose photos; videos were not included in the sample. Typically, each Instagram location page had nine top posts, but if a fraternity had a low number of photos posted, they might have had fewer. In fact, in some cases, a fraternity had fewer than five photos posted. Thus, we ultimately selected 49 fraternities from 127 universities to obtain 600 posts overall.

Coding System

Based on the Hatton and Trautner (2011) codebook, we coded 12 sexualization cues. The coding unit in this study was a fraternity Instagram photo post. For each post, elements related to the photo and the caption were coded. Due to the high occurrence of group pictures in this context (e.g., 80.5%, $n = 483$ of photos in the sample portrayed two or more people), we did not code each individual in the pictures.

Sexualization Variables

The study coded 12 sexualization cues on the photo level. Each cue is a binary variable, with 1 indicating *the presence* and 0 representing *the absence* of the cue.

Body Focus

This variable captured whether the photo featured the bodies of those presented in the photo. It was coded into two categories: absence (e.g., headshot) and presence (e.g., half or full body shot). Headshot pictures included pictures showing the face

and shoulders, ending at the sternum. Body shots represented the display of the partial (e.g., showing the face and the body below the sternum) or the entire body.

Revealing Clothing

This variable was coded as present when coders found somewhat/highly/extremely revealing clothing in the pictures. Examples included tube tops and one-piece bathing suits.

Sexualized Self-Touch

This variable was coded as present when a person's hands touched their own body parts in sexually suggestive ways, mostly on their breasts/chests, buttocks, thighs, or genitals.

Sex Acts

This cue measured whether an individual in the picture was engaged in or simulated sex acts (e.g., kissing, embracing, masturbating, showing a sexual hand sign, or simulating an erection). The presence code was applied when one sex act was demonstrated.

Sexual Role Play

This variable assessed whether sexual role play was displayed in the picture. Examples included infantilization (e.g., child-like clothing) and role play costumes like sexy cops, nurses, or fairies.

Sexualized Body Parts

We also coded the presence of five sexualized body parts: mouths, breasts/chests, abdomens, buttocks, and genitals.

Sexualized Mouths This variable captured whether the mouths shown in the picture were suggestive of sex. Examples were duck faces, tongues showing, and mouths slightly/half/widely open but not smiling or talking.

Sexualized Breasts/Chests When breasts/chests were slightly/largely/fully exposed or a focus of the image, coders coded this variable as present. One example was a low neckline showing breast cleavage.

Sexualized Abdomens This variable measured whether abdomens were largely/fully exposed or a focus of the image. Examples included exposed abdomens or abdomens under see-through clothing.

Sexualized Buttocks This cue was coded as present when buttocks were exposed or a focus of the picture. One example was a back-facing pose with buttocks flaunted.

Genital Area When the genital area was exposed or a primary focus of the image (e.g., pants unbuttoned or legs widely spread open), coders marked this variable as present.

Captions

For the captions, we coded sex and sexualization references respectively. None of the captions in our sample included *direct* calls to action to like the posts (e.g., a like-to-win contest: "like this post to win").

Sex Reference in the Caption This variable was coded as present when the caption mentioned or suggested sexual activity via words or emojis. Examples included "50shades" and "save a horse ride a cowgirl."

Sexualization Reference in the Caption This variable assessed whether the caption (words or emojis) emphasized body parts, nudity, or the sexiness of someone. Examples included "notice my tights" and "because you've got a pretty sweet ass!".

Number of Total Sexualization Cues Used Per Post

This variable was the sum of 12 sexualization cues. This was a continuous variable with a possible range from 0 to 12.

Non-Sexualization Variables

Number of Likes

Coders recorded the number of likes an Instagram post received.

Gender of Individuals in the Pictures

Coders were instructed to code the gender presentation of the individuals who were the focal point of the Instagram picture. The women-only option was applied when only individuals presenting as women were portrayed in the picture, whereas men-only was used when the photo only included individuals presenting as men. The mixed-gender option was marked when the image had both individuals presenting as men and women. Coders applied "can't tell/other" for photos without individuals or uncertain cases.

Race of Individuals in the Pictures

This variable was coded on the picture level based primarily on people's skin tone. Coders also used contextual clues such as the name of the person (when relevant), caption, or clothing/accessories to determine the race of all of the people in the photo. Pictures were categorized into one of the following options: mixed race, African American only, Asian American only, White only, Latinx only, and

Native American only. In addition, "unknown" and "other" codes were applied when race was unidentifiable or every person in the photo belonged to another racial group. This variable was coded for *descriptive* purposes; it was not used for RQ/H testing.

Coding and Reliability

Four female graduate students from a large southwestern university were trained to code the sample. The first author participated in training but did not code any of the final sample. Together, the group underwent approximately 22 h of face-to-face training over seven months. The codebook was revised and updated based on coders' feedback after each training meeting. The final codebook was composed of 23 pages with detailed instructions and representative photos. In the final sample ($N=600$), 60 posts (10%) were coded by all four coders to test intercoder reliability (ICR).

We adopted Gwet's AC_1 to assess ICR because it corrects for "kappa paradoxes" (i.e., when the percent of agreement is high, but the kappa coefficient is low), and it is particularly useful for the variables that have low-occurrence categories (Neuendorf, 2017). Considering that several sexualization variables in the present study involve considerably low occurrences (e.g., the frequency of sex reference in captions was 1.3%), we chose Gwet's AC_1 and used the "rel" package (Martire, 2016) in R to calculate ICR. According to Gwet (2014), the coefficient of AC_1 from 0.80 to 1 is deemed very good. The following variables attained acceptable ICR, and the individual coefficients of AC_1 and percent of agreement (%A) were listed: body focus ($AC_1=0.98$, %A$=98.33$), revealing clothing ($AC_1=0.79$, %A$=89.72$), sexualized self-touch ($AC_1=0.79$, %A$=85.00$), sex acts ($AC_1=1.00$, %A$=100$), sexual role play ($AC_1=0.92$, %A$=93.33$), mouths ($AC_1=0.80$, %A$=88.06$), breasts/chests ($AC_1=0.84$, %A$=90.83$), abdomens ($AC_1=0.88$, %A$=90.40$), buttocks ($AC_1=0.91$, %A$=93.33$), genitals ($AC_1=0.95$, %A$=95.83$), sex reference in the caption ($AC_1=0.99$, %A$=98.89$), sexualization reference in the caption ($AC_1=0.98$, %A$=98.06$), likes ($AC_1=1.00$, %A$=100$), gender in the photo ($AC_1=0.92$, %A$=94.74$), and race in the photo ($AC_1=0.85$, %A$=86.21$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Most of the Instagram posts featured White only subjects (66.0%, $n=396$), followed by mixed race (21.5%, $n=129$), African American only (6.2%, $n=37$), Latinx only (2.3%, $n=14$), Asian American only (1.3%, $n=8$), and other/not applicable (2.7%, $n=16$). Among the sample, 37% ($n=222$) of the photos included men only, 34.2% ($n=205$) had women only, 25.3% ($n=152$) portrayed mixed genders, and 3.5% ($n=21$) were unknown/not applicable. The number of sexualization cues used per post ($n=574$) ranged from 0 to 8, with a mean of 2.35 ($SD=1.54$, $Mdn=2$). The

Instagram posts, on average, received 247.62 likes ($SD = 213.32$), ranging from 1 to 2,796.

Sexualization in Fraternity Instagram Posts

The RQ asked how sexualization was portrayed through fraternity Instagram posts. As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of the fraternity photos displayed body shots. The next three most frequently used sexualization cues were clothing (one-third being revealing), mouths (a quarter being sexualized), and breasts/chests (a quarter being sexualized). In addition, approximately one in seven Instagram photos contained sexualized self-touch, and roughly the same number of photos included sexualized abdomens. Sexualized buttocks and genitals were not frequently used. The following four cues were rarely used: sexualization reference in the caption, sexual role play, sex act, and sex reference in the caption. Altogether, body shots, revealing clothing, sexualized mouths, and exposed breasts/chests were the most frequently used sexualization strategies in fraternity Instagram posts.

Gender Differences in Sexualization Cues

For H1 we predicted sexualization differences by gender in fraternity Instagram posts. Because the assumption of equal variances in the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was violated, we conducted Welch's ANOVA. The results showed significant gender differences in the sum of sexualization cue use on the post level, *Welch's F*(2, 337.93) $= 72.80$, *p* < 0.001, *est. $\omega^2 = 0.20$*. A Games-Howell post hoc test revealed that all three groups were significantly different from each other. Specifically, fraternity posts that included only women ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.63$) demonstrated the highest number of sexualization cues in a post, followed by posts with mixed genders ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.31$) and posts with only men ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.10$). Thus, H1 was supported.

We also conducted chi-square analyses to further examine these gender differences for each sexualization cue. As shown in Table 2, women-only posts displayed more sexualization cues than men-only posts on the following *seven* dimensions: revealing clothing, sex acts, sexual role play, breasts/chests, abdomens, buttocks, and sex reference in the caption. In contrast, men-only fraternity posts showed more genital areas than women-only posts. Further, men-only posts depicted more sexualized self-touches than mixed-gender posts. No gender differences appeared for three sexualization cues: body focus, sexualized mouths, and sexualization reference in the caption.

Sexualization and the Number of Likes

H2 predicted that more sexualized fraternity pictures would receive more likes on Instagram. Results of Spearman's correlation showed that the number of sexualization cues in a post positively correlated with the number of likes the post received, $r_s(572) = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$, supporting this hypothesis.

H3 predicted that gender moderates the relationships between the presence of sexualized body parts in fraternity posts and the number of likes. Because the number of likes is an overdispersed count variable, and the data are nested

Table 1 Frequencies of 12 sexualization cues in 600 fraternity Instagram posts

	Categories	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Body focus	Present (body shot)	545	90.8
	Absence (headshot)	45	7.5
	NA	10	1.7
Revealing clothing	Present	226	37.7
	Absent	350	58.3
	NA	24	4.0
Sexualized self-touch	Present	86	14.3
	Absent	504	84.0
	NA	10	1.7
Sex acts	Present	12	2.0
	Absent	581	96.8
	NA	7	1.2
Sexual role play	Present	18	3.0
	Absent	574	95.7
	NA	8	1.3
Sexualized Body Parts			
Mouths	Present	141	23.5
	Absent	449	74.8
	NA	10	1.7
Breasts/Chests	Present	138	23.0
	Absent	451	75.2
	NA	11	1.8
Abdomens	Present	82	13.7
	Absent	508	84.7
	NA	10	1.7
Buttocks	Present	53	8.8
	Absent	537	89.5
	NA	10	1.7
Genitals	Present	30	5.0
	Absent	560	93.3
	NA	10	1.7
Caption			
Sex reference	Present	8	1.3
	Absent	589	98.2
	NA	3	0.5
Sexualization reference	Present	20	3.3
	Absent	577	96.2
	NA	3	0.5

NA not applicable, can't tell, or other

Table 2 Differences in sexualization cue use by gender in fraternity Instagram posts

Variables	Men-only posts	Women-only posts	Mixed-gender posts	Total	Chi-square
Body focus					
Absent	6.8% (*n*=15)	7.3% (*n*=15)	6.6% (*n*=10)	6.9% (*n*=40)	χ^2 (2, *n*=579)=0.09,
Present	93.2% (*n*=207)	92.7% (*n*=190)	93.4% (*n*=142)	93.1% (*n*=539)	*p*=.96
Revealing clothing					
Absent	93.2% (*n*=204)a	25.9% (*n*=51)b	57% (*n*=86)c	60.1% (*n*=341)	χ^2 (2, *n*=567)=196.61
Present	6.8% (*n*=15)a	74.1% (*n*=146)b	43% (*n*=65)c	39.9% (*n*=226)	*p*<.001, Cramer's V=0.59
Sexualized self-touch					
Absent	82.4% (*n*=183)a	83.4% (*n*=171)a, b	91.4% (*n*=139)b	85.1% (*n*=493)	χ^2 (2, *n*=579)=6.55,
Present	17.6% (*n*=39)a	16.6% (*n*=34)a, b	8.6% (*n*=13)b	14.9% (*n*=86)	*p*=.04, Cramer's V=0.11
Sex acts					
Absent	100% (*n*=222)a	95.6% (*n*=196)b	98% (*n*=149)a, b	97.9% (*n*=567)	Fisher's exact test
Present	0% (*n*=0)a	4.4% (*n*=9)b	2% (*n*=3)a, b	2.1% (*n*=12)	*p*=.002, Cramer's V=0.13
Sexual role play					
Absent	98.6% (*n*=219)a	93.7% (*n*=192)b	98.7% (*n*=150)a, b	96.9% (*n*=561)	Fisher's exact test
Present	1.4% (*n*=3)a	6.3% (*n*=13)b	1.3% (*n*=2)a, b	3.1% (*n*=18)	*p*=.007, Cramer's V=0.14
Sexualized body parts					
Mouths					
Absent	80.2% (*n*=178)	71.2% (*n*=146)	75.7% (*n*=115)	75.8% (*n*=439)	χ^2 (2, *n*=579)=4.67,
Present	19.8% (*n*=44)	28.8% (*n*=59)	24.3% (*n*=37)	24.2% (*n*=140)	*p*=.10
Breasts/chests					
Absent	94.6% (*n*=210)a	57.4% (*n*=117)b	74.3% (*n*=113)c	76.1% (*n*=440)	χ^2 (2, *n*=578)=81.49,
Present	5.4% (*n*=12)a	42.6% (*n*=87)b	25.7% (*n*=39)c	23.9% (*n*=138)	*p*<.001, Cramer's V=0.38
Abdomens					
Absent	96.4% (*n*=214)a	70.6% (*n*=144)b	90.8% (*n*=138)a	85.8% (*n*=496)	χ^2 (2, *n*=578)=62.36,
Present	3.6% (*n*=8)a	29.4% (*n*=60)b	9.2% (*n*=14)a	14.2% (*n*=82)	*p*<.001, Cramer's V=0.33
Buttocks					

Table 2 (continued)

Variables	Men-only posts	Women-only posts	Mixed-gender posts	Total	Chi-square
Absent	97.7% (n=217)a	82.4% (n=169)b	92.1% (n=140)c	90.8% (n=526)	χ^2 (2, n=579)=30.43,
Present	2.3% (n=5)a	17.6% (n=36)b	7.9% (n=12)c	9.2% (n=53)	$p<.001$, Cramer's V=0.23
Genitals					
Absent	89.6% (n=199)a	99.5% (n=204)b	96.1% (n=146)a, b	94.8% (n=549)	Fisher's exact test
Present	10.4% (n=23)a	0.5% (n=1)b	3.9% (n=6)a, b	5.2% (n=30)	$p<.001$, Cramer's V=0.19
Caption					
Sex reference					
Absent	100% (n=222)a	97.1% (n=199)b	99.3% (n=151)a, b	98.8% (n=572)	Fisher's exact test
Present	0% (n=0)a	2.9% (n=6)b	0.7% (n=1)a, b	1.2% (n=7)	$p=.01$, Cramer's V=0.12
Sexualization reference					
Absent	97.7% (n=217)	94.1% (n=193)	98% (n=149)	96.5% (n=559)	Fisher's exact test
Present	2.3% (n=5)	5.9% (n=12)	2% (n=3)	3.5% (n=20)	$p=.09$

Fisher's exact tests were performed for the variables that included a cell with less than 5 cases. We adopted Bonferroni's method for pairwise comparisons

within fraternities, we performed multilevel negative binomial regressions (Gardner et al., 1995) using the "lme4" package (Bates et al., 2018) in R. To test this hypothesis, we put discrete fraternity organizations as the grouping variable, sexualized body parts (mouths, breasts, buttocks, and genitals),[1] gender (men-only, women-only, and mixed-gender), and the interaction terms (gender × each body part) into the model as predictors. The gender variable was dummy coded, with men-only posts as the reference group. As shown in Table 3, women-only fraternity posts were more likely to receive likes than men-only posts, IRR (Incidence Rate Ratios) = 1.27, $p = 0.010$. In addition, the model produced two interaction effects. Firstly, sexualized mouths portrayed in women-only photos were more likely to receive likes than sexualized mouths depicted in men-only photos, IRR = 1.48, $p = 0.012$. Secondly, the presence of sexualized buttocks in mixed-gender photos was more likely to attract likes than those depicted in men-only photos, IRR = 2.35, $p = 0.016$. The difference between the presence of sexualized buttocks in women-only versus men-only photos in receiving likes was *marginally significant*, IRR = 1.83, $p = 0.061$. The interaction effects are presented in Fig. 1. To summarize, H3 was supported by one of the five sexualized body part variables—sexualized mouths.

Discussion

In applying a multidimensional sexualization coding scheme to 600 posts, we provide a holistic view of how sexualization is visually presented in fraternity Instagram posts. The present study is among the first content analyses to examine Greek life's visual sexualization on Instagram. We contribute to the current literature on sexualization in two additional ways. First, this study finds that fraternity posts on Instagram reflect a prevailing element of Greek life culture: women's sexualization. Second, the study shows that fraternity posts with more sexualization cues garner more likes, which indicates an endorsement of sexualization among fraternities in the online world. We expand on these two contributions below.

Gender Differences in Fraternity Instagram Posts

The fraternity community has long been criticized for sexualizing, objectifying, and degrading women; our findings suggest that these gendered norms within Greek life are reflected on Instagram. Fraternity photos portraying only women have more sexualization cues than photos including only men or mixed genders. Specifically, women-only posts displayed more sexualization on breasts/chests, abdomens, buttocks, revealing clothing, sex acts, sexual role play, and sex references in the caption than men-only posts. The first three sexualization cues suggest the sexualization of

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[1] There was a moderate-to-strong positive association between sexualized breasts/chests and abdomens, χ^2 (1, $n = 588$) = 102.17, Cramer V = 0.42, $p < .001$. Therefore, we did not enter abdomens into the regression model to avoid multicollinearity.

Table 3 Multilevel negative binomial regressions to predict the likes of fraternity Instagram posts

| | The number of likes | | |
| | (N=578) | | |
	IRR	95% CI for IRR	p
Fixed effects			
Intercept	181.23	152.15–215.86	<0.001
Mouths	0.76	0.60–0.95	0.018
Breasts/chests	1.33	0.90–1.96	0.152
Buttocks	0.62	0.35–1.11	0.108
Genitals	1.24	0.93–1.67	0.147
Men-only posts	Ref.		
Women-only posts	1.27	1.06–1.52	0.010
Mixed-gender posts	1.09	0.91–1.31	0.339
Mouths × women-only	1.48	1.09–2.00	0.012
Mouths × mixed-gender	0.96	0.68–1.34	0.795
Breasts × women-only	0.92	0.59–1.41	0.689
Breasts × mixed-gender	0.98	0.62–1.55	0.916
Buttocks × women-only	1.83	0.97–3.44	0.061
Buttocks × mixed-gender	2.35	1.17–4.72	0.016
Genitals × women-only	0.90	0.24–3.40	0.872
Genitals × mixed-gender	1.10	0.58–2.07	0.770
Random effects			
σ^2	0.34		
τ_{00}	0.23		
ICC	0.41		
N of Frats	49		
N of Posts	578		
Marginal R^2	0.09		
Conditional R^2	0.46		
AIC	7334.99		

IRR incidence rate ratios, *ICC* intraclass correlation coefficient, *AIC* Akaike's information criteria

the female body (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). This is consistent with Davis's (2018) textual analysis which found that women's bodies were emphasized on two Instagram accounts targeting college students. We also found that revealing clothing was presented more often in women-only fraternity posts than in men-only or mixed-gender posts. This is in line with previous research results regarding gendered self-presentation in revealing clothing (Kapidzic & Herring, 2011, 2014; Yan, 2018). Lastly, posts with only women contained more sex acts, sexual role play, and sex references in the caption than posts with men only, implying that it is *women* who are used to simulate or connote sex in Greek life culture.

On the contrary, men-only posts emphasize the genital area more than women-only posts. Such a result appears to reflect men's real-life behavior. Roughly one
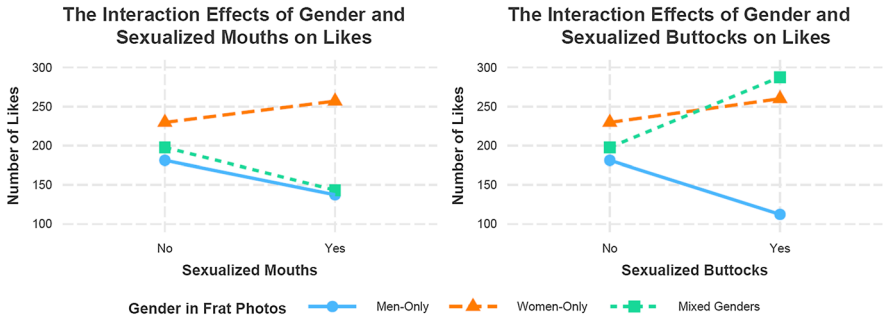
Fig. 1 The interaction effects of gender and sexualized mouths/buttocks on likes in fraternity Instagram posts

in 10 men-only photos in our sample emphasized their genital areas by spreading their legs far apart: an informal term for this posture is "manspreading." In general, men tend to take on wide, open movements and positions more frequently than women do (Davis & Weitz, 1981). This is represented in the photos in our study. Open body positions like manspreading are linked to dominance, such that taking up more space with one's body demonstrates authority and power (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). Therefore, emphasizing genitals in this way in pictures is a way that men, and specifically fraternity members, can display their power, as is historically associated with masculinity (Jane, 2016).

To summarize, we discovered that the sexualization of women seems to be firmly established in this group, and fraternities' online posts mirror the prominent Greek culture value of sexualizing women offline. Considering the risks associated with sexualization of women for fraternity members (e.g., tolerance of sexual violence and increase in rape-supportive attitudes; Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Seabrook et al., 2018), we recommend more research to focus on the interventions regarding this topic and this group.

Sexualization and Likes in Fraternity Instagram Posts

Another important set of findings is fraternities' endorsement of sexualization in the online environment, with sexualized fraternity Instagram posts garnering more likes. One image coded for this study portrays one girl in a crop top and shorts facing her buttocks to the camera, and another girl in revealing overalls. There are six sexualization cues present in this example—body shot, revealing clothing, breasts/chests, abdomen, buttocks, and sexual role play—and the post received 680 likes. The result is consistent with previous research findings that sexually suggestive pictures, on average, gain more positive feedback than non-sexualized images on social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). Additionally, these posts are uploaded to fraternities' location pages, indicating that the support for sexualization may be a collective decision within the organization.

Furthermore, we found two interaction effects of gender and exposed body parts on likes. First, sexualized mouths portrayed in women-only photos were more likely to receive likes than those depicted in men-only photos. One possible explanation is young adults' gender-specific perceptions of the "duck face," a sexualized posing of the mouth that involves pouting and puckering the lips to emphasize them. Forsman's (2017) qualitative study found that adolescents' norms for selfies differ by gender: girls are allowed to make the duck face in moderation, while boys should never enact this cue. The general disapproval of the duck face for males may partly explain why men received fewer likes for displaying a sexualized mouth than women did. In other words, women's portrayals of sexualized mouths incur benefits, while men are looked down upon and face the costs of enacting this behavior.

Second, if a photo contained only men displaying sexualized buttocks, it tended to receive fewer likes than mixed-gender photos containing the same cue. This may be similar to the case for sexualized mouths: men are seen as the ones who should not enact the sexual presentation of buttocks. Although we did not code for the gender of the people who enacted this behavior in mixed-gender photos, after reviewing the data, we found that it is often the *woman* who stands with her buttocks emphasized in these photos. Hence, it seems that the portrayals of women's, rather than men's, sexualized buttocks, is a successful strategy that garners more likes.

Overall, our study points out the approval of sexualization cues among fraternities on Instagram. Instagram offers an opportunity for people to see fraternity culture firsthand. Even though the top posts displayed on fraternity location pages are not exclusively generated by fraternity members, these posts document the trending activities and behaviors, and therefore, values of the fraternities. Given that likes serve as an endorsement of the pictures' content (Mascheroni et al., 2015; Sherman et al., 2016), it is implied that sexualized fraternity posts are welcomed, encouraged, and glorified. On an individual level, this endorsement can encourage fraternity-associated individuals to engage in more sexualization online in order to reap the benefits of being liked on Instagram. On a larger scale, the findings of this study show that fraternities' online interactions, as a whole, reinforce the long-lasting offline value of sexualizing women. This was especially evident because the presentations of women's sexualized mouths and buttocks were rewarded in the form of more likes. The likes that come in, as a result, strengthen the perceived value of this culture and may encourage viewers to match these norms. This instructs fraternity members to view women as objects to be looked at and used, rather than actual people with valuable identities and abilities, and can have ramifications such as enhancing rape-supportive attitudes and the tolerance of sexual violence for fraternity men (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Seabrook et al., 2018).

Practical Implications

The findings of this study are useful in various domains related to sexualization, social media, and Greek life group membership. University organizations—especially Greek letter organization leaders or freshman orientation planners—can utilize our results when developing trainings and arguments about the occurrence of online sexualization among fraternities. Previous college sexual violence prevention programs have predicted decreases in sexism and rape-myth acceptance (Stewart, 2014), as well as in sexual assault victimization of college students (Rothman & Silverman, 2007). Such interventions are also associated with greater bystander efficacy and feminist activism (Stewart, 2014). Along with this training, social media literacy classes on how to post online fraternity photos could be delivered. For instance, fraternity students can be encouraged to post fewer sexualized images and more prosocial activities such as fundraisers and philanthropy events. Also, fraternity students could be advised to limit their engagement (e.g., likes, shares, and comments) with sexualized photos of women online. On a larger scale, such implementations could work to evolve the culture of Greek life, decreasing the importance of hypermasculinity and sexualization of women in fraternities. This could reduce normative sexualization of the self and others and, consequently, the adverse outcomes associated with sexualization. Finally, this study can provide more backing to activist groups who fight against sexism, sexualization, and risky Greek life values.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present study systematically investigated the sexualization cues presented in fraternity posts on Instagram, several limitations should be considered. First, this study only analyzed one indicator of positive feedback—the number of likes on Instagram. Future research should include comments and examine how the audience discusses these sexualized posts in a naturalistic setting. Furthermore, the study did not analyze *who* liked sexualized fraternity Instagram posts. Considering that Instagram likes can be given by both followers and non-followers (Jang et al., 2015), future studies are needed to provide a detailed picture about *who* engages with sexualized fraternity Instagram posts. For example, understanding the gender breakdown of those who like or comment on a sexualized post can further suggest which gender plays a dominant role in sexualization endorsement on Instagram. Future studies are also encouraged to control for follower counts[2] when analyzing social media engagement.

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[2] We did not record Instagram users' follower counts when collecting data in November and December 2019. Based on a reviewer's suggestion, we recorded Instagram users' follower counts in August 2021 and conducted post hoc analyses for H2-3 controlling for follower counts. H2 was supported; results of the partial Spearman's correlation suggested a positive correlation between the number of sexualization cues in a post and the number of likes the post received, controlling for follower count, $r_s(499) = .16$, $p < .001$. For H3, after controlling for standardized follower count, all inferences remained the same, except for the interaction effect of mixed-gender (men as reference) and buttocks on likes. The differences of showing sexualized buttocks between mixed-gender and men-only photos in receiving likes became nonsignificant, IRR = 1.88, $p = .097$. Because the counts could have changed between when we initially coded the sample and when we recorded the follower counts, we regard these post-hoc analyses as tentative.

In facing the challenges of group pictures, we did not record each individual's attributes (e.g., gender) nor their respective sexualization cue(s). Future research could refine the unit of analysis to each individual presented in the picture. We expect that this would provide a more detailed understanding of who is displaying which types of sexualization in group photos. Last, it is worthwhile to conduct longitudinal research monitoring the dynamic changes of sexualization in social media posts during important Greek life events such as rush, weekly mixers, and philanthropy events.

Conclusion

Although Greek life has positive effects such as bonding and socialization, ample research shows that it is a problematic environment that perpetuates sexual assault and gendered dynamics (e.g., Iwamoto et al., 2014; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017; Seabrook et al., 2018). The present study indicates gender differences in fraternity Instagram posts, as posts featuring only women had a higher number of sexualization cues than posts depicting only men and mixed genders. We also found that the sexualization of women's bodies (i.e., mouths and buttocks) was endorsed in fraternity posts through the social currency of likes on social media. Such online interactions reinforce the value of sexualizing women as a theme in fraternity culture, particularly promoting sexualization as an important quality in being liked by others on Instagram. Considering the detrimental effects of the sexualization of women for fraternity members, we encourage Greek life intervention programs to include social media education to fight against sexism, sexualization of women, and potentially risky values.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval The study does not obtain data from human subjects and is exempt from an ethical review.

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