

Study connects objectification of women with increased vulnerability to sexual victimization

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Molly Franz. Credit: Molly Franz

University of Nebraska-Lincoln researchers have taken a first step toward understanding why some women struggle to say "no" to unwanted sexual advances and are more vulnerable to sexual victimization.

Past research has shown a connection between a lack of sexual assertiveness and the risk of [sexual assault](#). A new study conducted by Molly Franz, David DiLillo and Sarah Gervais of the Department of Psychology is one of the first to shed light on why [women](#) have a difficult time saying "no" in the first place. It was published online last week in *Psychology of Violence*, a journal of the American Psychological Association.

"While most other work tends to blame the victim, this study suggests that women's objectification by others is one of the driving forces," Gervais said. "Ogling women makes it more difficult for them to say 'no' in sexual encounters, putting them at greater risk for sexual assault."

Franz, who led the research, proposed that [sexual objectification](#), body surveillance and sexual assertiveness are sequentially linked to sexual victimization. Her study indicates that repeated ogling can lead women to be hyper-conscious of their appearance and sex appeal, contributing to low assertiveness in sexual situations and increasing their risk of being forced or coerced into sexual acts.

"Our prior work linked sexual objectification to increased risk for sexual assault," DiLillo said. "This study is the first to reveal possible mechanisms that may explain how seemingly mild experiences of being sexually objectified can increase women's vulnerability to sexual victimization."

In a survey, 297 undergraduate women ages 17 to 30 were asked about

how frequently they experienced ogling or unwanted sexual comments; how intensely they monitored their physical appearance; how assertive they were in refusing unwanted sexual advances; and their experience with unwanted sexual contact. More than 38 percent of the group reported they had been sexually victimized.

Though Franz stressed that the data shows correlations and not causes, the survey indicated that women who frequently experience sexual objectification—leers, comments and come-ons based on their bodies—were also more likely to experience [sexual victimization](#). It also indicated that women who intensely monitor their appearance are often less sexually assertive and less able to refuse unwanted sexual advances.

"Body surveillance—a habitual monitoring of outward appearance—may reflect a core belief that one's value rests predominantly on one's sexual appeal to others," Franz wrote. "Such a belief may erode assertiveness in sexual situations, as women increasingly come to view their sexuality as subject to the will of others. Their preoccupation with how others see them may prevent them from recognizing their own desires."

Gervais described the study as an important "first."

"Molly is the first to propose this sequence of relations and to find initial evidence for the model," she said. "Of course, since it is the first of its kind, it is important to replicate these findings and examine the generalizability for other populations, in ways that allow causal inferences."

Franz and Gervais stressed that their findings do not blame the victims for sexual assault.

"Although the fault of sexual violence always lies with the perpetrator—and work to prevent perpetration is essential—it is also

important to understand factors that increase women's vulnerability to sexual assault," Franz wrote.

Such knowledge can help us better understand why sexual assault occurs and prevent it from happening, she said.

Even though leers and catcalls seem harmless on the surface—only looking, but not touching—they can fundamentally change how women see themselves and interact with their relationship partners, Gervais said.

DiLillo said the findings suggest strategies to reduce sexual assault.

"First and foremost, interventions aimed at reducing men's objectification of women are needed," he said. "When objectification does occur, risk can be reduced by teaching women ways to combat the tendency to internalize these sexualized messages, which may bolster assertiveness in unwanted sexual situations."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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