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Image Sexualization and Self-Sexualization in Women: The Role of Sexualized Cultural Product Consumption and Age

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetic and sexualized ideals of women have become an imperative for social acceptance, contributing to the sexualization of female self-image. In this context, the present study aimed to evaluate the consumption of sexualized cultural products and its relationship with self-sexualization and the sexualization of women in photographs, additionally exploring the role of age in these phenomena. A total of 964 Ecuadorian women participated (M = 29.74 years; SD = 11.93), who were grouped into three age cohorts: young adults (18–29 years), middle-aged adults (30–49 years), and mature adults (50–69 years). Instruments included an ad hoc sociodemographic questionnaire, a survey on consumption of sexualized cultural products, the Image Sexualization Scale, and the Self-Sexualization Scale. Results showed that consumption of sexualized products significantly predicted both photo sexualization and self-sexualization, while age played a relevant role only in photo sexualization, suggesting that self-sexualization might be influenced by other factors. The findings of this study are discussed.

Keywords: Female Image, Consumption of Sexualized Products, Image Sexualization, Self-Sexualization, Age.

INTRODUCTION

In Western society, sex occupies a central place in the value hierarchy (Padrós, 2021). This phenomenon began in the 20th century with the convergence of the sexual revolution (1960s) and the rise of capitalism (Cobo, 2015; Giddens, 2010), which generated two events that have intensified in recent decades: the hypersexualization of culture and the objectification/sexualization of women.

Hypersexualization of Culture

Eroticized and sexualized representations are ubiquitous in contemporary society, creating an imaginary of constant commerce of desire and pleasure (de la Paz, 2021; Feinman, 2013). The sexualized body is valued as an object through which relationships are established; this body is portrayed according to an ideal and hegemonic image of beauty, imposing a standard to be attained (de la Paz, 2021). Several decades ago, this phenomenon began to be discussed using various terms: raunch culture, porn-chic style, pornographication, pornification, pornoculture (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Padrós, 2021; currently, it is referred to as the hypersexualization of culture (Arias, 2023; Choi & DeLong, 2019; Padrós, 2021).

Hypersexualization is present everywhere. Advertising depicts young women with voluptuous bodies, wearing makeup and posed sensually, often shown in lingerie or semi-nude on billboards, magazines, television, and posters (Bayazit, 2020; Grande-López, 2019; Méndiz, 2018). These images serve to sell all kinds of merchandise and services. Female products (makeup, creams, hygiene products, clothing) follow the same logic, overemphasizing physical and sexual appearance (Narros et al., 2020; Pérez-Montero, 2016). Thus, the female image acquires value through her bodily appearance, which allows her to be attractive to the male gaze, not only in romantic terms but also sexual ones (Quiñones, 2024).

Fashion has largely contributed to this phenomenon; for example, lingerie is associated with sexuality, becoming a fetish for male pleasure, in contrast to the simplicity of men's underwear (Castro, 2020). Kennedy (1993, cited in Awasthi, 2017) offered one of the earliest definitions of provocative clothing, referring to it as 'clothing that deviates from the norm by alluding to a more sexually charged context than the one in which it is worn' (p. 2); Lynch (2007) expanded this definition by including the impact of such garments on others. Thus, fashion fully participates in the erotization of consumption that governs the postmodern world; what is considered sexy at a given moment tends to become normalized and then updated toward more provocative styles. This explains 'the evolution of the sexy appearance toward pornography and hypertely[1] ' (Quiñones, 2024, p. 57), a phenomenon that has intensified in recent decades, as seen since the 1980s in the progressive objectification of the female image in fashion through styles such as porn-chic, fetish fashion, and bondage style (Quiñones, 2024).

Sexualization is also present in music videos and lyrics, with music being the medium containing the most of such content; its sexualization increased nearly threefold between 1990 and 2000 (APA Division 46, 2018). Regarding women, it is evident across several musical genres (Fuster, 2021; Luque Ruz, 2020; Merlyn, 2020; Urueña & Eslava, 2022). The same occurs in films and series, where women are portrayed wearing short and tight clothing that highlights breasts and buttocks, made up and perfect according to prevailing standards. Even female screen icons have been reimagined with more sexualized images, such as *Wonder Woman* in recent film adaptations (Pérez & Larrondo, 2019), some characters from the telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la Fea* in its new versions (Gamboa et al., 2022), current heroines in fictional programs (Rodríguez, 2020), and protagonists in *anime* and video games (De Lima-Vélez et al., 2023; Molares-Cardoso et al., 2022). Something similar happens on the internet: models, *influencers*, and even anonymous women present themselves in sexualized ways on platforms such as OnlyFans (Santana & Martín-Palomino, 2021), Twitch (Peinado-Morchón, 2021), or YouTube, where so-called *titty streamers* have gained fame (Delgado, 2021).

Mainstream pornography, now accessible to everyone, features women with perfect bodies offering themselves to all kinds of sexual practices. In these scenarios, they appear as objects serving male pleasure; the content is presented as *normal* and *acceptable*, becoming a model in the collective imagination of what sexual and romantic relationships are and affecting the construction of sexuality (Ballester et al., 2020; Cobo, 2020; Merlyn et al., 2020; Padrós, 2021).

Objectification of Women

Hypersexualized society conveys the message that 'a woman's value lies in the amount of sexual desire she can generate' (Padrós, 2021, p. 151), a notion closely tied to female objectification. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) defines this term as a 'process of reducing a person to a sexual object (body), in which physical beauty prevails over personality and individual existence' (Padrós, 2021, p. 149). In psychology, the concept is broadened to refer to *sexualization*, which, according to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2007), involves one or more of the following conditions:

- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- 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; and/or
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (APA, 2007, p. 1).

Sexualization has been extended from adult women to girls, an issue that has been increasingly questioned and condemned due to its harmful consequences (Padrós, 2021). A child is sexualized when an adult ideal is imposed upon them (APA, 2007), while in adolescents and adults, sexualized behaviors appear to be chosen by the individuals themselves as part of their identity expression. However, identity, which Erikson (1971) described as being shaped during adolescence, is a developmental process that begins in early childhood. Various psychological theories have demonstrated that a significant portion of behavior is acquired through modeling (Bussey & Bandura,

[1] Excessive development of an anatomical structure (Note by the authors)

1984), and that people gradually adopt as their own the images and messages from their environment (APA, 2007). Thus, girls and adolescents learn—through exposure to a hypersexualized culture—what is expected of women and try to fulfill those expectations by replicating behaviors that are socially rewarded (APA, 2007). This results in the appropriation of the sexualized model, expressed in the development of *preferences* (such as clothing or makeup that emphasizes sexual traits) (APA, 2007), which appear to be freely chosen.

Therefore, the hypersexualization of culture impacts the construction of female identity. Authors such as Harvey and Gill (2013) argue that women are building an identity based on sexual entrepreneurship, in which they feel obligated to be sexy and to live up to social narratives—turning beauty, desirability, and sexual performance into personal projects.

Self-Sexualization

The daily consumption of hypersexualized content generates self-sexualization in the female psyche, which manifests in sexualized practices and behaviors aimed at seeking external validation (Cordero, 2023). This reflects social pressure to conform to the hegemonic beauty standard by adopting sexualized styles and behaviors as one's own. According to Moreno (2021), this is the result of the internalization of societal axiological standards and the unconscious or involuntary acknowledgment, by women, of the social value associated with sexualization. Choi and DeLong (2019) define self-sexualization as 'the voluntary imposition of sexualization to the self' (p. 18) and conceptualize it by adapting the four criteria proposed by the APA (2007). The presence of any one of these criteria is sufficient to indicate self-sexualization:

1. Favoring sexual self-objectification: Women in this condition seek male attention as well as personal satisfaction; their pleasure comes from gaining male approval or believing that their appearance or actions will be appreciated by men.
2. Relating sexual desirability to self-esteem: Women in this condition believe that being sexually desirable enhances their self-esteem.
3. Equating physical attractiveness with being sexy: Self-sexualizing women consistently focus their efforts on their appearance, considering it the only way to appear sexually attractive.
4. Contextualizing sexual boundaries: Women may compromise their sexual boundaries and accept invasions of their sexuality depending on the context, adjusting their sexual permissiveness accordingly.

Image Sexualization

Self-sexualization leads women to engage in self-objectifying behaviors, which are reflected in the prioritization of an appearance aligned with attractiveness standards linked to hypersexualization. A common—though often trivialized—example is the posting of personal photos on platforms such as Instagram, as well as the use of profile pictures on WhatsApp or Facebook.

The evolution of photography is closely tied to technological development. With digitization, access to photography expanded and became more popular, due both to the availability of low-cost image production devices and the proliferation of free platforms for sharing them (Comesaña, 2021). In postmodernity, digital platforms have evolved to focus on self-exhibition, becoming spaces for self-presentation and the pursuit of recognition. They have been transformed into showcases where users display carefully curated images of themselves, which Belk (2013) conceptualizes as the *extended self*. This construction takes on the characteristics of an advertising strategy, as the individual presents themselves as a product intended for the viewer's approval (Arias, 2023; Fontcuberta, 2016). Thus, virtual spaces have shaped a new dimension of social identity.

Over the past decade, a notable shift has occurred in the content of photographs posted on social media (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2024). This shift is evident in the rise of self-photography (selfies, mirror photos), which are edited in terms of angles, poses, and the use of filters (Lasén, 2012). These images inscribe the body into both digital and physical realms across three key dimensions: presentation (of the body and the self), representation (for oneself and for others), and embodiment (Lasén, 2012). Selfies, more than a simple image of the person, constitute a *performance of identity* (Cuervo, 2020).

The dynamic between seeking positive feedback and conforming to socially valued sexualized standards promotes uncritical adherence to such norms, as online validation becomes an imperative for social acceptance—especially for women, as documented in several studies (Rodríguez, 2023; Merlyn et al., 2024; Vendemia & Fox, 2024; Ward et al., 2023). Image sexualization, as understood in this and previous studies (Merlyn, 2020; Merlyn et al., 2024), refers to the visual representation of a person in which sexual or erotic aspects are emphasized through three main elements: (1) attitude or body posture, including facial expressions and provocative poses suggesting sexual availability; (2) clothing or lack thereof, highlighting the use of revealing garments, lingerie, or clothing that exposes the body in a suggestive manner; (3) the context in which the image is framed: intimate environments such as the bathroom, shower, or bed, reinforcing an erotic connotation. One of the strongest motivations for such

representations is the search for attention, as these photos tend to receive more likes and attract more friends/followers (Ramsey & Horan, 2018).

In this context—where conformity to aesthetic and sexualized ideals becomes an imperative for social acceptance—and considering the growing documentation of female self-image sexualization, the present study aimed to assess the consumption of sexualized cultural products and its relationship with: (1) Image sexualization in photographs, understood as the visual representation that emphasizes sexual or erotic aspects through body attitude, clothing, and contextual setting; and (2) Self-sexualization in women, defined as the voluntary imposition of sexualization upon the self. Additionally, this study explored the role of age in these phenomena, examining whether younger participants present a greater consumption of sexualized cultural products and, consequently, show higher levels of image sexualization and self-sexualization.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 964 Ecuadorian women between 18 and 69 years of age participated (M = 29.74; SD = 11.93), selected through incidental convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (a) self-identification as a woman; (b) being 18 years old or older; (c) Ecuadorian nationality; and (d) voluntarily subscribing their participation through informed consent. Three age groups were formed based on recognized stages of human development in psychology (Papalia & Martorell, 2021): (1) young adults (18–29 years), (2) middle-aged adults (30–49 years), and (3) mature adults (50–69 years). Other sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample

Age group	N	%
Young Adults	614	63.7
Middle-aged Adults	255	26.5
Mature Adults	95	9.9
Marital Status		
Single	690	71.6
Married	187	19.4
Separated/Divorced	52	5.4
Common-law Marriage or Cohabitation	31	3.2
Widowed	4	0.4
Educational level		
Primary – incomplete or complete basic	4	0.4
Secondary – incomplete or complete high school	220	22.8
Incomplete University	254	26.3
Complete University	262	27.2
Postgraduate	224	23.2
Employment Status		
Unemployed	102	10.6
Part-time Employee	60	6.2
Full-time Employee	274	28.4
Independent worker/consultant/contractor	114	11.8
Student	392	40.7
Other	22	2.3
Region		
Coast region	50	5.2
Highlands/Andes	897	91.4
Amazonian Region	15	1.6
Galapagos Islands	2	0.2
Family Income Level (in US dollars)		
0 to 120	387	40.1
121 to 270	73	7.6
271 to 390	46	4.8
391 to 620	87	9.0

621 to 1000	134	13.9
More than 1000	237	24.6
Ethnic Identification		
Mestizo	904	93.8
Coastal mestizo (Montubio)	2	0.2
Afro-Ecuadorian/Afro-descendant/Mulatto/Black	19	1.9
Indigenous	13	1.3
White	26	2.7
Religion		
Catholic	529	54.9
Pentecostal Christian	49	5.1
Protestant	32	3.3
Mormon, Jehovah's Witness	21	2.2
Other non-Christian religion	21	2.2
None	312	32.4
Sexual Orientation		
Bisexual	100	10.4
Heterosexual	824	85.5
Homosexual	17	1.8
Other	23	2.4

Instruments

Sociodemographic Data Sheet

A sheet designed to collect information such as: age, marital status, educational level, employment status, region, family income level, ethnic group, religion, sexual orientation.

Survey on the Consumption of Sexualized Cultural Products

This survey included questions designed to gather information about the consumption of eroticized/sexualized products in the following areas:

1. Music: Five sexualized music genres linked to the sexualization of content and dance (Alexopoulos et al., 2023; Alpízar-Lorenzo et al., 2021; Hrytseniuk, 2020; Merlyn, 2020): reggaeton, urban, bachata, salsa, and pop.
2. Sexualized series: A list based on the work of Sánchez (2023). Participants could also add other series with sexualized content.
3. Sexualized movies: A list based on the proposal by Martínez and Cámara (2024). Participants also had the option to add other movies with sexualized content.
4. Fashion and styling (clothing): Based on literature indicating that fashion sexualizes women (Chung, 2022; Edwards, 2018), a list of sexualized clothing items was created: very short garments (skirts, dresses, shorts) or tight-fitting; bralettes; lingerie; tops or garments that expose the abdomen, back, and/or breasts; upper or lower garments made of transparent fabric or knitwear revealing skin; leather or lace clothing.

In each category, participants had the option not to choose any of the proposals. To obtain a continuous measure of sexualized product consumption (SP Consumption) per participant, the total number of products selected by each individual was summed.

Image Sexualization Scale (Merlyn, 2020)

This scale uses three indicators of sexualization to rate images depicting women (videos or photographs): (1) provocative attitude/posture, (2) provocative clothing or absence of clothing, and (3) intimate settings. Each image is rated by an external evaluator with 0 (indicator absent) or 1 (indicator present). Images receive a total score of 0 (non-sexualized image), 1 (sexualized image), 2 (moderately sexualized image), or 3 (highly sexualized image). In the study by Merlyn et al. (2024), the scale showed acceptable reliability ($\omega = 0.761$). For self-administration in this study, the scale was adapted and presented as a series of questions. The reliability analysis of this version yielded $\omega = 0.715$, suggesting adequate internal consistency of the items.

Self-Sexualization Scale (Choi, 2017)

This instrument consists of 26 positively worded items grouped into four subscales, adapting the parameters with which the APA (TFSG, 2007) conceptualizes sexualization: (1) favoring sexual self-objectification, (2) relating

sexual desirability with self-esteem, (3) equating physical attractiveness with being sexy, and (4) contextualizing sexual boundaries. The questionnaire is self-administered, with responses on an eight-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 8 (strongly agree). For the present study, the original English version of the questionnaire was adapted into Spanish through an expert-validated translation process.

In its English version, the scale's reliability ranges from $a = 0.93$ to $a = 0.94$ across the four subscales. In the adapted version used in this study, reliability is high for all four subscales (Subscale 1: $\omega = 0.907$; Subscale 2: $\omega = 0.933$; Subscale 3: $\omega = 0.955$; Subscale 4: $\omega = 0.956$), indicating a strong internal consistency of the items.

Procedure

A questionnaire containing the informed consent form and the instruments was created using *Google Forms*. An invitation to participate in the research was disseminated via email and social media, following acceptance of the informed consent. Data collection took place over an eight-month period in 2024.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in three segments. First, a general analysis of the variables was performed, divided into two parts: (1) descriptive analysis of variables related to the consumption of sexualized products (music, movies, series, and clothing) and the overall variable computed as 'sexual product consumption'; (2) descriptive analysis of variables associated with sexualization (photo sexualization and the four subscales of self-sexualization). For these analyses, the three age groups created among participants –young, middle-aged, and mature adult – were used. Normality of the variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with Lilliefors correction (Flores & Flores, 2021; Pedrosa et al., 2015), and as no normal distribution of the data was found, the Welch ANOVA test was applied (Monleón-Getino, 2016), with Games-Howell's *post-hoc* test for between-group comparisons, assuming unequal variances.

The second part of the analyses focused on correlations between the variables SP Consumption and age with the variables related to sexualization. Correlations were calculated using Spearman's correlation coefficient (*Rho*) to determine the strength and significance of the relationships.

Finally, an independent linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive potential of SP Consumption and age as independent variables for the different measured domains of sexualization. Data management and analyses were performed using SPSS version 28 software.

RESULTS

Comparison of SP Consumption across Age Groups

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that none of the analyzed variables followed a normal distribution: number of rhythms ($D = 0.164$, $p < .001$), number of series ($D = 0.164$, $p < .001$), number of movies ($D = 0.159$, $p < .001$), number of clothing items ($D = 0.109$, $p < .001$) and exposure to sexualized products ($D = 0.058$, $p < .001$). Therefore, non-parametric tests were used for comparisons. Levene's test showed that the variances were not homogeneous ($p < .01$ o $p < .001$), while Welch's ANOVA revealed significant differences between groups ($p < .001$) and the Games-Howell *post hoc* test indicated that all group differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Young adult women showed higher scores across all categories, followed by middle-aged adults and, finally, mature adults. This suggests that the younger women are, the higher their SP consumption. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2. *Comparison by Groups in SP Consumption*

Variable	Levene's Test	Welch's ANOVA	Group Comparison	Mean Difference (I-J)			Standard Error	p-
	value	95%CI Lower	95%CI					Upper
Musical genres	12.509***	51.330***	Young A. – Middle A.	0.58	0.11	.000	0.33	0.83
			Young A. – Mature A.	1.23	0.13	.000	0.93	1.53
			Middle A – Mature A.	0.65	0.14	.001	0.32	0.99
Series	5.371**	35.273***	Young A. – Middle A.	0.51	0.16	.004	0.13	0.88
			Young A. – Mature A.	1.54	0.18	.000	1.10	1.98
			Middle A – Mature A.	1.04	0.21	.000	0.53	1.54
Movies	16.372***	64.582***	Young A. – Middle A.	1.26	0.16	.000	0.89	1.63
			Young A. – Mature A.	1.99	0.19	.000	1.54	2.43

			Middle A – Mature A.	0.73	0.20	.001	0.26	1.19		
Clothing	5.716**	114.179***	Young A. – Middle A.	1.63	0.20	.000	1.18	2.08		
			Young A. – Mature A.	3.37	0.24	.000	2.80	3.94		
			Middle A – Mature A.	1.74	0.28	.000	1.09	2.39		
SP Consumption	3.977**	148.830***	Young A. – Middle A.	3.98	0.41	.000	3.00	4.95		
			Young A. – Mature A.	8.12	0.50	.000	6.95	9.29		
			Middle A – Mature A.	4.15	0.56	.000	2.84	5.46		

Note: **p < .01 ***p < .000

Comparison of Photo Sexualization and Self-Sexualization Subscales across Age Groups

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov-Lilliefors test indicated that the analyzed variables did not follow a normal distribution: photo sexualization ($D = 0.250$, $p < .001$) and self-sexualization (subscale 1: $D = 0.225$, $p < .001$; subscale 2: $D = 0.216$, $p < .001$; subscale 3: $D = 0.217$, $p < .001$; subscale 4: $D = 0.363$, $p < .001$). Therefore, non-parametric tests were used for the comparisons. Levene's test showed that the variances were not homogeneous, as significant differences were found between age groups for both photo sexualization and the self-sexualization subscales ($p < .001$). Welch's ANOVA also revealed significant differences ($p < .001$), which were further analyzed using the Games-Howell *post hoc* test.

Regarding photo sexualization, young adult women were found to post more sexualized photos than middle-aged and mature women, and middle-aged women posted more of these types of photos than mature women. This finding indicates a clear trend: the younger the age, the higher the level of photo sexualization.

Across all four self-sexualization subscales, young women consistently scored higher than the other two age groups. However, the differences between middle-aged and mature women did not reach statistical significance in any of the dimensions. This suggests that self-sexualization decreases with age, being more pronounced in youth. Table 3 presents these results.

Table 3 Comparison by Age Groups in Photo Sexualization and Self-Sexualization Subscales

Variable	Levene's Test	Welch's ANOVA	Group Comparison	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	p-value	95%CI Lower	95%CI Upper
Photo Sexualization	58.712***	223.277***	Young A. – Middle A.	0.934	0.07	.000	0.76	1.11
			Young A. – Mature A.	1.385	0.07	.000	1.23	1.54
			Middle A – Mature A.	0.451	0.08	.000	0.27	0.63
Self-Sex 1	14.905***	19.960***	Young A. – Middle A.	3.286	0.64	.000	1.79	4.79
			Young A. – Mature A.	4.199	0.85	.000	2.20	6.20
			Middle A – Mature A.	0.914	0.57	.573	-1.23	3.05
Self-Sex 2	13.605***	18.007***	Young A. – Middle A.	2.524	0.64	.000	1.02	4.03
			Young A. – Mature A.	4.425	0.81	.000	2.52	6.33
			Middle A – Mature A.	1.902	0.87	.077	-0.16	3.96
Self-Sex 3	13.825***	25.720***	Young A. – Middle A.	3.443	0.78	.000	1.61	5.27
			Young A. – Mature A.	5.526	0.81	.000	3.61	7.45
			Middle A – Mature A.	2.083	0.92	.064	-0.09	4.26
Self-Sex 4	5.668**	8.589***	Young A. – Middle A.	1.830	0.65	.015	0.29	3.37
			Young A. – Mature A.	2.735	0.70	.000	1.09	4.38
			Middle A – Mature A.	0.905	0.75	.447	-0.85	2.66

*Note: Self-Sexualization Subscales: Self-Sex 1: Favoring sexual self-objectification; Self-Sex 2: Relating sexual desirability to self-esteem; Self-Sex 3: Equating physical attractiveness with being sexy; Self-Sex 4: Contextualizing sexual boundaries; **p < .01; ***p < .000*

Correlation Analysis

Table 4 shows positive and significant correlations between SP Consumption and the sexualization variables (photo sexualization and the four self-sexualization subscales), as well as negative and significant correlations with age.

Table 4 Correlation Analysis (Rho) between SP Consumption, Sexualization Variables and Age

	SP Consumption	Photo Sexualization	Self-Sex 1	Self-Sex 2	Self-Sex 3	Self-Sex 4	Age
SP Consumption	1	.527***	.405***	.328***	.292***	.156***	-.365***
Photo Sexualization		1	.414***	.345***	.347***	.211***	-.419***
Self-Sex 1			1	.627***	.589***	.414***	-.181***
Self-Sex 2				1	.694***	.463***	-.146***
Self-Sex 3					1	.406***	-.214***
Self-Sex 4						1	-.130***
Age							1

*Note: Self-Sexualization Subscales: Self-Sex 1: Favoring sexual self-objectification; Self-Sex 2: Relating sexual desirability to self-esteem; Self-Sex 3: Equating physical attractiveness with being sexy; Self-Sex 4: Contextualizing sexual boundaries; **p < .01; ***p <. 000*

Independent Linear Regression Analysis

To determine the extent to which SP Consumption predicts the sexualization variables, independent stepwise linear regression analyses were conducted. For the analysis of photo sexualization, all 964 valid cases were included. For the self-sexualization variable, cases with outlier values (more than 3 standard deviations from the mean) were excluded from each subscale, in the following proportions: less than 2% for the first three subscales (Self-Sex 1: 18 cases; Self-Sex 2: 13 cases; Self-Sex 3: 17 cases) and less than 5% for the fourth subscale (Self-Sex 4: 28 cases). In the stepwise linear regression analysis, Model 1 included only SP Consumption, while Model 2 included both SP Consumption and age, in order to assess the individual impact of each predictor. All models are presented in Table 5 and are explained below.

Models for Photo Sexualization

The Durbin-Watson independence assumption was verified (*D-W* = 1.988) and both models were found to be highly significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the predictor variables (SP Consumption and age) explain a substantial portion of the variability in photo sexualization.

In Model 1, SP Consumption explained 25.5% of the variance; the coefficients for this model were $\beta 0$ = -0.077 for the intercept and $\beta 1$ = 0.095 for SP Consumption. In Model 2, the inclusion of age improved the model (adjusted R^2 = 0.325); although SP Consumption remained a positive and significant predictor, its effect decreased. This result indicates that age has a significant negative effect—that is, the older the participant, the lower the tendency toward photo sexualization. Model 2 is therefore the most appropriate, explaining 32.5% of the variance; the coefficients for this model were $\beta 0$ = 1.073 for the intercept, $\beta 1$ = 0.071 for PS Consumption y $\beta 2$ = -0.028 for age. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was < .2, indicating no multicollinearity issues.

Models for the Self-Sexualization Subscales

The Durbin-Watson independence assumption was verified for all four self-sexualization subscales, and Model 1 was found to be highly significant ($p < .001$). In all four subscales, the inclusion of age (Model 2) had no impact, so it was concluded that Model 1 was the most appropriate in all cases. The results for each subscale were as follows:

- Subscale 1 (Self-Sex 1: Favoring sexual self-objectification): *D-W* = 1.904; SP Consumption as predictor of variance = 14%; model coefficients: $\beta 0$ = 5.839 for the intercept and $\beta 1$ = 0.493 for SP Consumption; VIF < .1.
- Subscale 2 (Self-Sex 2: Relating sexual desirability to self-esteem): *D-W* = 2.002; SP Consumption as predictor of variance = 9.9%; model coefficients: $\beta 0$ = 6.009 for the intercept and $\beta 1$ = 0.440 for SP Consumption; VIF < .1.
- Subscale 3 (Self-Sex 3: Equating physical attractiveness with being sexy): *D-W* = 2.073; SP Consumption as predictor of variance = 7.9%; model coefficients: $\beta 0$ = 7.852 for the intercept and $\beta 1$ = 0.455 for SP Consumption; VIF <. 1.

- Subscale 4 (Self-Sex 4: Contextualizing sexual boundaries); *D-W* = 1.833; SP Consumption as predictor of variance = 2.5%; model coefficients: *β0* = 9.360 for the intercept and *β1* = 0.119 for SP Consumption. VIF < .1.

Table 5 Predictive Models for SP Consumption

Variable	Model	R2	R2Adjusted	F	B	β	t	VIF		
Photo Sexualization			1 (Intercept)	0.256	0.255	330.878***		-0.077	-	-1.022
SP Consumption			0.095	0.506	18.190***		1.00			
2 (Intercept)		0.325	0.323	230.845***		1.073	-	7.832***		
SP Consumption			0.071	0.379	12.864***		1.24			
Age		-0.028	-0.291	-9.879***		1.24				
Self-Sex 1	1 (Intercept)		0.141	0.140	154.403***		5.839	-	10.103***	
SP Consumption			0.493	0.375	12.426***		1.00			
Self-Sex 2	1 (Intercept)		0.100	0.099	104.977***		6.009	-	9.590***	
SP Consumption			0.440	0.316	10.246***		1.00			
Self-Sex 3	1 (Intercept)		0.080	0.079	81.924***		7.852	-	10.696***	
SP Consumption			0.455	0.282	9.051***	1.00				
Self-Sex 4	1 (Intercept)		0.026	0.025	24.977***		9.360	-	26.874***	
SP Consumption			0.119	0.161	4.998***	1.00				

*Note: Self-Sexualization Subscales: Self-Sex 1: Favoring sexual self-objectification; Self-Sex 2: Relating sexual desirability to self-esteem; Self-Sex 3: Equating physical attractiveness with being sexy; Self-Sex 4: Contextualizing sexual boundaries; *** p<.000; R2: Coefficient of determination; R2Adjusted: Adjusted coefficient of determination; F: ANOVA; B: Unstandardized Beta; β: Standardized Beta; t: t-test; VIF: Variance Inflation Factor.*

These analyses indicate that SP Consumption is a significant predictor of both photo sexualization and self-sexualization: in all cases, higher consumption is associated with a greater tendency toward these behaviors or attitudes. Age plays a relevant role in photo sexualization, as its inclusion improves the explanation of variance, with a significant negative effect, indicating that the older the individual, the lower the tendency to sexualize photos. In the case of self-sexualization, SP Consumption explains a higher percentage of variance in the first three subscales and a smaller percentage in the fourth. However, age does not predict any of the self-sexualization subscales, suggesting that other factors not included in the model might influence this aspect. All these findings are summarized in Figure 1.

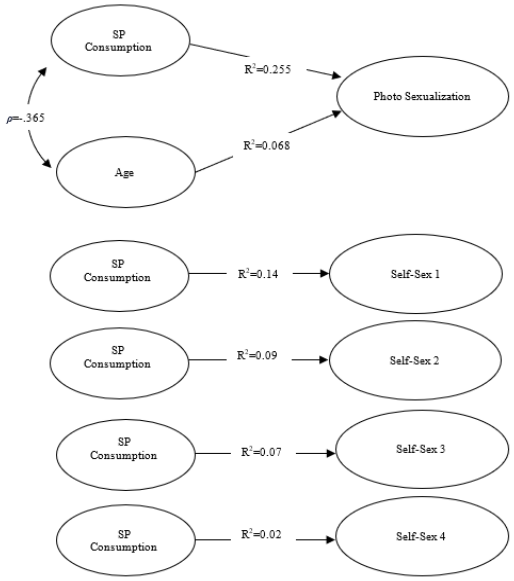

Figure 1 *Regression Models of Photo Sexualization and Self-Sexualization based on Sexualized Product Consumption and Age*

Note: Self-Sexualization Subscales: Self-Sex 1: Favoring sexual self-objectification; Self-Sex 2: Relating sexual desirability to self-esteem; Self-Sex 3: Equating physical attractiveness with being sexy; Self-Sex 4: Contextualizing sexual boundaries.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to evaluate the consumption of sexualized cultural products and its relationship with image sexualization and self-sexualization in women, exploring the role of age in these phenomena.

The results show that the younger the women, the higher their consumption of sexualized cultural products such as music genres, series, movies, and clothing items. From Foucault's perspective (2005), power devices not only repress but also regulate subjects through social norms that define what is acceptable or desirable. In this case, contemporary discourses and practices, mediated by the market and articulated with patriarchal culture, construct a strongly sexualized image of femininity primarily targeted at young women (Cobo, 2015; Giddens, 2010; Padrós, 2021). Digital culture, as a new power device, regulates female sexuality under the apparent freedom of choice. Immersed in a highly visual and digitalized environment, young women are the privileged target of an industry that sexualizes their bodies and naturalizes this representation as synonymous with success, beauty, and social acceptance (de la Paz, 2021; Feinman, 2013; Narros-González et al., 2020). From an early age, they learn through modeling (Bussey & Bandura, 1984; APA, 2007) what is expected of them, normalizing these references as part of their identity.

The findings indicate that young women tend to post more sexualized photographs, suggesting an internalization of eroticized beauty standards promoted by the media (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Moreno, 2021 These standards become aspirational references that influence the construction of female identity (Harvey & Gill, 2013). As Bourdieu (2000) points out, there are *rules of the field* that define women as being seen and valued 'through being socially inclined to treat themselves as aesthetic objects' (p. 72), through which they are assigned specific roles within the market of symbolic goods and exist fundamentally for and through the gaze of others. In this sense, being desired becomes a condition for social existence; posting sexualized photos emerges as a strategy to achieve that goal, which can be understood as a contemporary form of control over the female body. Technological transformation and image-based culture have played a crucial role (Bauman, 2009; Belk, 2013; Lasén, 2012) by facilitating self-presentation on social media as a performance of identity (Cuervo, 2020). Indeed, the regression analyses conducted revealed relationships between the consumption of sexualized cultural products, photo sexualization, and the dimensions of self-sexualization among the women participating in this study.

The strongest relationship was found between the **consumption of sexualized cultural products and photo sexualization**. Regression analyses showed that SP Consumption predicts 25.5% of the variance in photo sexualization, a value that increases to 32.3% when age is included in the model, indicating that the phenomenon is more pronounced among young women. This reinforces the idea that younger women, who are more exposed to these types of products, are also more likely to reproduce these visual models in their own representations. This relationship can be explained by objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) and by studies that have documented the progressive sexualization of women's self-image (Rodríguez, 2023; Ward et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the results show that the **consumption of sexualized cultural products explains the dimensions (subscales) of self-sexualization to different extents**. Specifically, it predicts 14% of the variance in favoring sexual self-objectification, 9.9% in relating sexual desirability to self-esteem, 7.9% in equating physical attractiveness with being sexy, and only 2.5% in contextualizing sexual boundaries. These differences indicate that the consumption of sexualized cultural products has a greater impact on forms of self-sexualization that involve external validation (subscale 1), where pleasure and self-perception depend on others' evaluations—particularly those of men—a condition reinforced by exposure to cultural messages that sexualize women's bodies. Subscales 2 and 3—which reflect more internalized processes, such as linking self-esteem to sexual desirability or equating attractiveness with sexiness—show a lower proportion of explained variance, yet remain influenced by the consumption of sexualized cultural products. This suggests that sexualized messages contribute to shaping women's self-perception, likely in interaction with other personal or social factors.

The self-sexualization subscale with the lowest explained variance is Subscale 4 (Contextualizing Sexual Boundaries). According to the instrument's author (Choi, 2017), this dimension encompasses extreme behaviors that are highly influenced by the environment, as it assesses women's willingness to consider actions such as verbal harassment, sexual innuendos, groping, or non-consensual physical contact as part of a social or sexual play, revealing a relaxation of boundaries depending on the context. The results for this dimension in the present study suggest that such behaviors may be more determined by situational variables and social dynamics than by the consumption of sexualized cultural products. In the Ecuadorian context, sociocultural factors may be operating to counteract the effects of such consumption on these types of behaviors—such as the public campaigns implemented in recent years to raise awareness of and reduce sexual harassment in public spaces (ONU Mujeres, 2022; Ministerio de Gobierno, 2023). This growing social awareness may be reinforcing certain normative boundaries related to consent and public sexual conduct, and acting as a protective factor, particularly among

women who, despite being exposed to culturally sexualized representations, are simultaneously receiving messages that promote bodily autonomy and the rejection of normalized forms of sexual violence.

Overall, the findings regarding the effect of the consumption of sexualized cultural products on self-sexualization are consistent with previous studies, such as that of Ward et al. (2017), who found that frequent exposure to media that objectifies women predicts higher levels of self-sexualization. This process functions as a *trap*: under the guise of freedom, many women believe they are exercising autonomy over their bodies when, in reality, they are responding to external imperatives driven by market forces and patriarchal logic. The findings also align with definitions of self-sexualization as a voluntary imposition (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Moreno, 2021), where the internalization process is reinforced by digital culture, which transforms self-presentation into a product designed for the desire of others (Fontcuberta, 2016; Arias, 2023).

These results call for a critical reflection on the supposed female empowerment through sexualization. Authors such as Han (2012) have suggested that domination no longer operates under the figure of the master, but rather through self-inflicted violence in an attempt to reach imposed standards. This can be understood as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000), where, under the guise of empowerment, subordination is actually reproduced (De Wilde et al., 2021). There is a social pressure toward sexualization, with styling and fashion exerting strong influence on women from an early age, promoting self-objectification in childhood (Narros-González et al., 2020). Thus, many women—particularly younger ones, and often without full awareness—may yield to the imperatives of the cultural industry and patriarchy, having learned that a sexualized image attracts attention. Framed as *artistic*, they unknowingly reproduce social conventions that privilege desirability (Moreno, 2021). These behaviors are socially reinforced through approval, comments, or gazes, which are only present when appearance conforms to prevailing standards (Choi & DeLong, 2019; Wesely, 2012), thereby reinforcing the value placed on the sexualized body as a path to social acceptance.

However, Choi and DeLong (2019) argue that not all women who self-sexualize feel empowered, and when they do, the feeling is often not sustainable. In fact, some studies have found that this form of representation can have several negative consequences, such as increased perceptions of objectification by their partners and decreased relationship satisfaction (Ramsey, 2017, as cited in Choi & DeLong, 2019), being targets of street harassment without recognizing it as such, particularly among young women (Choi et al., 2023), or experiencing ostracism, which in turn threatens and diminishes the satisfaction of their fundamental needs, such as belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence (Dvir et al., 2021). In this regard, the supposed empowerment offered by digital culture through sexualization does not constitute genuine autonomy but rather a form of symbolic subordination. As De Wilde et al. (2021) point out, although the belief that sexualization is a source of power increases perceived agency, it also reinforces objectification and negative evaluations in other social domains; this suggests that the use of sexualization as empowerment does not help women escape the status of sexual object but may instead perpetuate it.

The results of this study have several important implications, as they contribute to the understanding of the role of visual and digital culture in the construction of female identity. Additionally, they provide empirical evidence supporting the theoretical framework on the effects of hypersexualized culture on female subjectivity, especially among young women, supporting the postulates of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and self-sexualization theory (Choi, 2017; Choi & DeLong, 2019; Choi et al., 2023). The findings also strengthen the critique of discourses of female empowerment through sexualization, inviting reflection on it as a contemporary form of control. At a sociocultural level, the results warn of the risk of naturalizing the sexualization of the female image as a legitimate form of visibility and success, indicating an urgent need for educational interventions with a gender perspective and critical digital media literacy.

This research, however, has some limitations. One of them is its cross-sectional design, which prevents establishing causal relationships between the consumption of sexualized cultural products and self-sexualization. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may have influenced the results, especially regarding behaviors that participants may not recognize as sexualized. Another aspect is the sociocultural context of the study, as sexualized perceptions and expressions vary across regions, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should take these limitations into account and expand the topic, for example, by studying the psychological and social consequences of self-sexualization, as well as the mediating or moderating roles of other variables (such as social media, content, and critical self-awareness). Such research could serve as a basis for designing psychoeducational programs that dismantle falsely empowering discourses.

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Competing Interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Marie-France Merlyn participated in all stages of the process: Material preparation, data collection and analysis, drafting of the first version of the manuscript, and writing of the final version. Elena Díaz-Mosquera contributed to the writing of the manuscript, critical review, and editing. Rodrigo Moreta-Herrera participated in the methodological design and data analysis. Liliana Jayo contributed to data collection and the critical review of the first draft. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (Date: 14/03/2024 – Code: EO-216-2023).

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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