

WOMEN'S SEXUAL EMPOWERMENT ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

by

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual empowerment is an ill-defined construct, often described in discrete parts as subjective (*power to*) or functional (*power over*). A continuous multidimensional model has been proposed by Zoë Peterson (2010) that bridges this divide, but lacks empirical support. This study assessed women's perceptions of and experiences with sexual empowerment across the lifespan to evaluate Peterson's model. An online sample of heterosexual women ages 18 – 70 was recruited to complete a questionnaire composed of *power to* and *power over* measures, and the results were compared across four age cohort groups. No significant differences were found in responses across age cohort groups. Correlations between measures call the categorization of measures into question, and a need for more accurate tools is discussed. Women responded most favorably to the continuous multidimensional definition of sexual empowerment, even though results from other measures did not support it.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Empowerment pertains to the belief that one has control over one's life. Its definitions are complex and ambiguous, but the concept has been studied within both community psychology and individual psychology. Psychological empowerment is most closely associated with theories of social psychology, and is often related to an individual's development of self-efficacy, elevation of self-esteem, and comprehension of personal control (Spencer, Maxwell, & Aggleton, 2008). The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s adopted this conceptualization of empowerment and has applied it to women's sexuality.

Sexual attitudes and behaviors cannot be isolated from the culture in which they exist. In the media-saturated culture of the United States, the message is delivered, via multiple forms of communication e.g., magazines, television, and internet, that women are sexual objects whose worth is determined by men, and that women are expected to conform to gender stereotyped sexual roles (Murnen & Smolak, 2012). Girls and women who internalize these messages may exhibit maladaptive behaviors such as self-surveillance. Self-surveillance is the monitoring of one's body as if from an outsider's perspective to verify that one is meeting cultural beauty standards, which can induce body shame, which can, in turn, lead to eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Murnen & Smolak, 2012). Although culture and media clearly influence



sexual empowerment, they do not define it. Sexual empowerment is a complicated construct composed of many elements. This paper will review the extant literature describing and evaluating sexual empowerment. Studies evaluating sexual empowerment from both subjective and objective experience perspectives are reviewed, then a continuous and multidimensional model is described. Finally, a project evaluating this continuous and multidimensional model is proposed.

### **Sexual Empowerment as Power To**

The subjective belief that one possesses the *power to* make one's own sexual choices, including presentation and action, is one form of sexual empowerment. The internal sense of having the ability to make choices about one's sexual life is an important component of sexual empowerment because a person must perceive herself to be powerful before she can effect empowered behavior (Zimmerman, 1995).

According to research by Erchull and Liss (2014), engaging in self-sexualizing behaviors may be considered an expression of one's sexual control. These behaviors could include dressing provocatively or dancing in an overtly sexually suggestive manner. Researchers have harnessed the construct of self-sexualization to investigate subjective sexual empowerment because, although indirect, "women who engage in these behaviors report them to be a manifestation of their sexual empowerment" (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p.775). Over the course of three studies with a total of 721 young adult female participants, Liss, Erchull, and Ramsey (2011) developed and tested the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (ESS) to explore the implications of gaining a sense of reward from superficial sexual male attention. They posed the question: "Is enjoying sexualization

empowering or oppressing?” The first study revealed that many women enjoyed sexualized male attention, engaged in self-sexualizing behaviors, and derived a temporary elevation in self-esteem from feeling attractive (Liss et al., 2011). According to the second study, women who enjoyed self-sexualization tended to view their bodies from an outsider’s perspective and valued appearance above the function of their bodies, surveyed their bodies to assure they were meeting socially-approved beauty standards, and felt shame about their bodies (Liss et al., 2011). The third study found that women who enjoyed sexualization also tended to endorse benevolent sexism, which is the belief that women are precious and should be treasured and protected by men (Liss et al., 2011).

After developing the ESS, Erchull and Liss (2013) then explored the concept of employing sexuality to derive power and the coinciding subjective feelings of sexual empowerment. The concept is similar but distinct from enjoying sexualization; one can enjoy receiving sexualized attention without believing that sexuality can be utilized as a derivation of power. The study explored women’s evaluations of how much power they believed that they personally acquired by being beautiful and sexy, as well as how much they presumed that women did so overall (Erchull & Liss, 2013). The study of 580 young adult women culminated in the Sex is Power Scale (SIPS). Once again, endorsing this construct was related to benevolent sexism and customary notions about the role of women. Women who personally endorsed using sexuality as a source of power were “more likely to body survey, though they were not more likely to feel shame about their bodies” (Erchull & Liss, 2013, p. 49-50).

Building on this research and incorporating the ESS and SIPS that they had developed, Erchull and Liss (2014) questioned whether engaging in self-sexualizing behavior, enjoyment of sexualization, and acknowledging sex in and of itself as a way to attain personal power resulted in sex positive outcomes “such as feeling good about one’s sexuality, being able to ask for what one wants and refuse what one does not want sexually, and actually enjoy sexual encounters” (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 774). The researchers introduce the term sexual subjectivity, which encompasses “a sense of attractiveness and desirability, sexual self-efficacy, and a belief that one should receive sexual pleasure from sex” (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 777). If the enjoyment of sexualization results in subjective empowerment, one would hope that there would be coordinating beliefs and behaviors that demonstrate “sexual satisfaction and sexual agency” (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 773). The measurements of self-sexualizing behavior, enjoyment of sexualization, and support of the belief that sex is a source of power all related to sexual self-esteem, which is a reflection of one’s confidence as a sexual partner. This can be interpreted as an affirmation of sexual subjectivity, or, conversely, support of self-objectification, that is, belief that one is an outstanding sexual object. “Self-sexualizing behavior was significantly positively correlated with [sexual] assertiveness” (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 785). Sexual assertiveness is more squarely associated with empowerment. However, the results do not support sex positive outcomes. Women who endorsed self-sexualizing behavior, enjoyment of sexualization, and support of the belief that sex is a source of power were more likely to have faked orgasm. Achieving orgasm with a partner is considered a gauge of positive sexuality.

However, repeatedly faking orgasm might signal that one is supplanting one's own pleasure with the sexual gratification of one's partner. "Thus, faking orgasm can be seen as somewhat in opposition to an empowered, agentic sense of one's self as a sexual being who is entitled to her own sexual pleasure" (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 777). In addition, "these operationalizations of perceived sexual empowerment were associated with having more sex but not with greater enjoyment of those sexual encounters" (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 785). The authors emphasized the complexity of the results; the women presented a range of individual attitudes and behaviors. They concluded that "if desire, satisfaction and orgasm is central to sexual subjectivity, then an objectified sexuality is not the ideal route to an empowered sexual subjectivity" (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 786). In line with these results, Steer and Tiggemann (2008) assert that self-objectification and self-surveillance correlate with body shame and appearance anxiety, and that all of these constructs contribute to self-consciousness during sexual activity, which is not conducive to healthy sexual functioning.

Much debate among feminist researchers revolves around whether this subjective sense of sexual empowerment alone, when it does not result in measurably empowered behavior, is a legitimate form of power. Women claim that self-sexualization is harmless, fun, and boosts their self-esteem. Liss et al. (2011) and Erchull and Liss (2013; 2014) have uncovered a complicated relationship between subjective empowerment, by way of self-sexualization, and true empowerment. Peterson (2010) champions women's ability to feel powerful in their sexuality, even if it is a narrow realization of power. She points out that even feeling at liberty to present oneself in a sexualized manner is a rebellion against

certain social constrictions. Some evidence, such as women's testimonials about increases in self-esteem and correlations with sexual assertiveness, corroborates the support of self-sexualization as a worthy form of empowerment. But Lamb (Lamb & Peterson, 2012) worries that women are being duped by a false sense of empowerment, and the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) reiterates that the societal context must be considered: "women are valued predominantly for their appearance, which is deemed acceptable only if it conforms to narrowly defined standards." There are established relationships between self-sexualization and adverse behaviors such as self-objectification and self-surveillance. Endorsement of benevolent sexism might predict how women align themselves in regard to adopting or rejecting self-sexualizing behaviors. There is fear of maligning the construct of subjective empowerment, though, because women could be left adrift with no sense of power and no understanding of how to acquire power (Peterson, 2010).

### **Sexual Empowerment as Power Over**

Evidence of sexual empowerment is observable when one has *power over* one's life. It is the functional form that sexual empowerment can take, demonstrated by choices and actions that reflect one's expectations of respect and equality. This is the aspect of sexual empowerment that feminist researchers tout as the realization of genuine empowerment (Lamb & Peterson, 2012).

There is a long-standing conflict in feminist thinking that Thompson and Donaghue (2014) sum up as

the debate...between those who argue that the increased sexualization of culture does (or can) provide women with greater opportunities for sexual self-expression, liberation, and empowerment versus those who argue that it merely dresses objectification up in empty rhetoric that sounds like empowerment, but that does little to either change sexual politics or to broaden the opportunities available for women's sexual self-expression (p. 23-24).

Though the exact character of 'empowerment' referenced is not explicitly defined, advocates of self-sexualization say it "removes pernicious double standards that have highly limited women's forms of sexual self-expression by harshly judging women who deviate from the narrow confines of 'respectable' feminine sexuality" (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014, p. 24). To assess how real-world women perceive this quandary, Thompson and Donaghue interviewed 17 women. The women claimed to enjoy wearing sexy clothes and makeup because it temporarily bolstered their self-esteem. The women interpreted the increase in self-confidence as sexual empowerment because appreciative male attention was pleasing. The thinking hinges on the belief that "if something feels good it must be positive" (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014, p. 28) – logic that curbs any further consideration into the matter. Thompson and Donaghue were skeptical that this declaration of empowerment represented genuine power. Confidence and self-esteem were viewed by the participants as acceptable reasons to enjoy sexualized male attention. The women approved of self-sexualizing if it improved self-esteem and one was doing it because she felt comfortable with it. Self-sexualizing was deemed inappropriate by the

participants if one felt compelled to do it to compensate for low self-esteem or to conform to societal expectations. This paradox exposed the dubious nature of attempting to obtain empowerment through presenting oneself in a sexualized manner. Participants firmly insisted that self-sexualizing behaviors were undertaken for the women's own benefit, not because they were required by men or done for men, in spite of men being granted the role of judging women's sexiness.

In interviews with women who engaged in casual or nonromantic sex, Moran and Lee (2014) reveal how deeply ingrained some sexual discourses are in our culture, particularly the "masculine model" of sexuality. Women find themselves acting out accommodating roles in scenes of "male-focused activity," the sexual gate-keepers to men's insatiable sexual desires (Moran & Lee, 2014, p. 162). The authors underline the impact of neoliberal ideas on our culture. Neoliberalism, which is presented as extolling individual choice and responsibility, provides "an apparent celebration of individual choice, but in fact provides a very restrictive range of socially possible 'choices'" (Moran & Lee, 2014, p. 166) because it ignores the gender power differential that exists. Through this lens, a woman who acquiesces to a man's appeal for intercourse without a condom, for example, interprets this as her personal choice (and conceivably, even a demonstration of empowerment) because she gave consent. The women presented themselves as having *power over* their sexual activities, but their conversation contradicted these assertions, revealing that they felt only capable of inhibiting some activities, but not actively determining a course of action (Moran & Lee, 2014, p. 171-172). The women seemed to be aware of the limitations of this rhetoric, "but had great

difficulty in even conceiving the idea of transgressing them, in the absence of a more empowered discourse of female sexual agency” (Moran & Lee, 2014, p. 171). To be fair, the authors acknowledge that some women resisted the dominant discourses and communicated having autonomy and confidence in expressing their sexual preferences. However, “empowerment at an intellectual level seemed considerably easier than enactment of an empowered position in actual sexual situations” (Moran & Lee, 2014, p. 177). And women who practiced an empowered sexuality were labelled as “unfeminine and abnormal” (Moran & Lee, 2014, p. 162). This backlash has been described by the *status incongruity hypothesis* (SIH) as the reprisal that women suffer for adopting conduct that upsets the gender status quo (Infanger, Rudman, & Sczesny, 2016).

To operationalize the activities that constitute self-sexualization, Smolak, Murnen, and Myers (2014) developed the Self-Sexualization Behavior Questionnaire (SSBQ). The researchers’ goal was to develop a tool that reliably and validly measured college-aged adults’ everyday self-sexualizing behaviors. Through an initial qualitative study, they identified commonly endorsed behaviors, such as wearing tight clothes or removing body hair, which contrast with more brazen illustrations of sexuality, such as pole dancing or flashing one’s breasts, which are featured by the Sexualizing Behavior Scale (SBS). A further distinction of the SSBQ is that it investigates self-sexualizing behaviors, rather than attitudes about those behaviors, and isolates behaviors from their consequences. The quantitative analysis established that self-sexualization was related to self-monitoring, which Smolak and her colleagues considered a negative outcome. Positively, self-sexualization was related to sexual consciousness, which is defined here



as “an awareness of sexual needs and preferences,” and sexual assertiveness, which includes “expecting one’s wishes to be respected in sexual situations” (Smolak et al., 2014, p. 385). These positive correlations assert the contribution of self-sexualizing to a person’s *power over* their sexual activities. Smolak et al. also traced a link between self-sexualization and benevolent sexism, but questioned whether favoring benevolent sexism led to presenting oneself in a sexualized manner, or alternately, endorsing self-sexualization precipitated a sense that men should pamper and protect women.

When exploring sexual empowerment, having *power over* one’s environment is difficult to operationalize. It should be observable, but research is unclear on what it looks like. In spite of being presented as a goal by many feminist researchers (Lamb & Peterson, 2012), there is no consensus on how to measure functional sexual empowerment. Although self-sexualization is often used as a proxy for sexual empowerment, the construct is largely open to interpretation, resulting in a body of literature that is difficult to synthesize. No clear conclusions about active sexual empowerment can be easily drawn from the research. Feminist researchers warn that women who claim to gain *power over* their sexual interactions through self-sexualization are actually conforming to draconian concepts of female sexuality, even as measures of self-sexualization are found to correlate with constructs aligned with active empowerment (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). Women who do achieve power through self-sexualization are the target of retaliation and viewed as unfeminine (Infanger et al., 2016). Moran and Lee (2012) lament the absence of a framework of empowered sexual agency for women to look to for guidance.

### **Is Sexual Empowerment Continuous and Multidimensional?**

There is a model of sexual empowerment that attempts to reconcile the varied perceptions of subjective empowerment (i.e., *power to*) and functional empowerment (i.e., *power over*). Peterson (2010) asserts that subjective versus functional empowerment is a false dichotomy. Rather, sexual empowerment exists on a continuum that develops across an individual's lifetime that varies by context and from person to person—that is, sexual empowerment is continuous and multidimensional.

Zimmerman (1995) laid the groundwork for this multidimensional theory of sexual empowerment with his outline of psychological empowerment. He described the components of psychological empowerment as *intrapersonal (power to)* and *behavioral (power over)*, which are bridged by an *interactional* component. Zimmerman discussed the nuance of empowerment. First, each individual has unique awarenesses, abilities, and behaviors that are reflected in empowerment. Second, different situations call for the use of different ideas, capabilities, and actions—which suggests that empowerment is contextual. Finally, empowerment is not constant; it is dynamic and might fluctuate over time and across situations. This makes empowerment difficult to operationally define, but more applicable to human development and real-world observation and experience.

Peterson (2010) defends subjective sexual empowerment as a legitimate, albeit narrowly realized, form of power. After all, *feeling* empowered is key to being able to exercise sexual empowerment (Peterson, 2010; Zimmerman, 1995). She contends that girls must be allowed to traverse their own paths of sexual empowerment, even if they include iterations of oppressive or misogynistic forms of sexuality. The hope is that one

will transcend expressions of sexuality that researchers, like Lamb, view as limiting by society to achieve a more functional form of sexual empowerment (Lamb & Peterson, 2012). In a coauthored forum paper (Lamb & Peterson, 2012), Peterson asks:

Can an adolescent girl's subjective feelings of empowerment—including feelings of sexual desire, pleasure, and agency—count as one dimension of sexual empowerment that in some ways serve her well in the future and contribute to her ability to know herself sexually, make positive sexual decisions, become a true partner in relation to another person, and not participate in sex in a way that supports oppressive practices? (p. 705)

Peterson's perspective is that sexual empowerment is a continuous, lifelong process rather than a singular, one-time goal.

In addition to being continuous, Peterson's model of sexual empowerment is multidimensional. Peterson utilizes Zimmerman's framework to describe each dimension of sexual empowerment. The *intrapersonal* dimension consists of "feelings of sexual self-efficacy, desire, and pleasure"; the *interactional* dimension includes "Clarity about... sexual wants and desires, as well as understanding... how to communicate [those] sexual needs and desires to [a] partner"; and "asking for what [one wants] sexually, refusing unwanted sexual experiences, and generally exploring [one's] emerging sexuality (alone or with a partner) in ways that feel positive and healthy" occurs on the *behavioral* dimension (Peterson, 2010, p. 310). This means that throughout one's lifetime, one could be empowered on a certain dimension(s) while simultaneously disempowered on some other(s). The term ambivalent empowerment was coined to describe this state (Peterson,

2010). A potential scenario of ambivalent empowerment could be a girl who feels desire and is exploring her sexuality, but does not know precisely what she wants; she is empowered on *intrapersonal* and *behavioral* dimensions, but not on the *interactional* level. As further complication, one act, a lap dance for example, could be fully empowered in one instance and disempowered in another, and many factors could be considered to make that determination, such as context, an individual's motivation, personality, state of mind, and involvement of others.

Peterson's arguments are pointedly refuted by other feminist researchers. For example, in writing their coauthored forum paper (Lamb & Peterson, 2012), Lamb rejects subjective sexual empowerment, claiming it is an insufficient explanation, and summarily dismisses self-sexualization as a positive expression of sexuality because, she suggests, girls are merely conforming to misogynistic, socially permissible scripts of female sexuality. Peterson sums up this rejection, saying, "Sexual behavior that feels sexually empowering for a particular girl may function to reproduce cultural and institutional constraints on women's sexuality more broadly" (Peterson, 2010, p.308). Lamb also questions the developmental model because there is no clear endpoint: "what makes experimentation 'just' experimentation and isn't formative—leading a girl to construct sexuality along a narrow dimension?" (Lamb & Peterson, 2012, p.709). Denying the legitimacy of subjective sexual empowerment raises the issue of who is qualified to assess whether a girl is sexually empowered if the girl's own judgment is disregarded. Peterson opts to respect girls' judgment and freedom to explore their own sexuality.

These worthwhile debates have been explored theoretically, but have not been researched empirically.

### **Summary and Purpose of the Current Study**

Sexual empowerment is a contentious issue in feminist research. One camp sees merit in women *believing* that they have *power to* control their sex lives (Peterson, 2010), whereas the opposing faction demands proof of *power over* sexual choices before declaring women sexually empowered (Erchull & Liss, 2014; Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). The continuous, multidimensional model of sexual empowerment proposed by Peterson (2010) conceptualizes the construct as developing throughout the lifespan and consisting of several discrete components which garner varying levels of mastery in different situations. The model explains women's individual relationships with subjective (*power to*) and functional (*power over*) sexual empowerment, which vary in influence depending on context. The purpose of the current study was to begin to quantify the perceptions and experiences that women have with sexual empowerment as they may apply to this continuous, multidimensional model.

The goals of this project were to 1) assess the continuous, multidimensional model of sexual empowerment, 2) measure the relationship between women's attitudes about sexual empowerment and their behavior, and 3) ascertain women's opinion of the continuous, multidimensional model of sexual empowerment. Specifically, it was hypothesized that results would support the concept that sexual empowerment is continuous and multidimensional. Older women were hypothesized to demonstrate more functional, *power over* sexual behaviors, elucidating the continuous nature of sexual

empowerment across the lifespan, compared to younger women. Secondly, it was hypothesized that measures of women's sexual behavior would not match their elevated declarations of sexual empowerment. That is, women would endorse more subjective, *power to* measures than functional, *power over* measures. No hypothesis was asserted regarding women's judgments of the continuous, multidimensional model.

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

#### Participants

One hundred twenty-one women between the ages of 18 to 70 years ( $M = 37.54$ ;  $SD = 11.8$ ) participated in this study. Most of the sample consisted of Caucasians (83.5%) who were in a relationship (73.6%). Almost all of the participants had some college education: Bachelor's degree (33.9%), a Master's, Doctorate, or Professional degree (33.1%), attended some college but no degree (16.5%), or an Associate's degree (16.5%); the remaining participants were high school graduates (5%). Recruiting occurred through the MTSU SONA system and online, with a link to the survey posted on a blog targeting women of particular ages, and snowball sampling via social media. Because the emphasis of this study was on sexual empowerment as it relates to sexual interaction with men, only women who are sexually attracted to men were included as participants.

#### Measures

**Demographic Information.** This study collected demographic information including age, relationship status, ethnicity, and education level (see Appendix A). Collecting age allowed assessment of the theory of continuous sexual empowerment across the lifespan. Other information illuminated relationships between relationship status, ethnicity, and education level with perceptions of and experience with sexual empowerment.

**Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (ESS; Liss et al., 2011).** This unidimensional measure assesses women's attitudes about enjoying sexualized male attention. There are

8 items on this scale, each scored on a 6-point Likert rating on which 1 = *disagree strongly* and 6 = *agree strongly* (see Appendix B). Overall score was obtained by averaging the ratings across the 8 items. Internal consistency was reportedly .85 (Liss et al) and .86 in this study. Validity measures indicate significant correlations between the ESS and the Self-Objectification Questionnaire, the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale, the Contingencies of Self-Worth scales and the Sexualizing Behavior Scale (Liss et al.). For the purposes of this study the overall score excluded item 5 because it pertains to a behavior (“I like showing off my body”) and this measure was used to assess attitudes. In the current study, the ESS provided a measure of participants’ subjective (*power to*) beliefs about what is sexually empowering.

**Sex is Power Scale (SIPS; Erchull & Liss, 2013).** This measure assesses the extent to which women believe that sex can be used as a source of power. The SIPS has 13 items, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*; see Appendix C). Items load on two subscales, the Self subscale (S-SIPS) and the Women in General subscale (W-SIPS). Scores for each scale are the mean ratings across the items. Internal consistency of the S-SIPS was .89 and on the W-SIPS was .79, with an intercorrelation between the scales of .59 (Erchull & Liss, 2013) (and overall scale was .88 in this study). In the current study, the SIPS provided a measure of the *power over* sexualized behaviors that women report engaging in, as well as the extent to which respondents believed other women engage in those activities.

**Self-Sexualization Behavior Questionnaire (SSBQ; Smolak et al., 2014).** This measure assesses how frequently women engage in particular behaviors to appear sexy



(see Appendix D). Ten items are responded to using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The scale was altered for this study to add a time option (i.e., 5 = *most of the time*) to make this a six-point Likert to be consistent with the other scales used. The ten items were averaged to get a mean Self-Sexualization score. Internal consistency measures range from .73-.88, (.87 in this study), and validity was demonstrated through factor analysis (Smolak et al., 2014). In the current study, the instructions of the SSBQ were altered from “Please indicate how often you do each of the following things specifically in order to look sexy” to “Please indicate how often you do each of the following things specifically in order to influence men.” The change in instruction aimed to identify behaviors that women engage in specifically to exert *power over* sexual interactions. This provided a measure of actions women reported engaging in to present themselves as sexually assertive.

**Sexual Behavior Items (SBI).** Four items were developed for this study to assess *power over* (i.e., functional empowerment) sexual behaviors in which women engage (see Appendix E). These items were generated based on researchers’ assertions about the favorable results of functional sexual empowerment, including sex positive outcomes, sexual subjectivity, and sexual assertiveness (e.g., Erchull & Liss, 2014; Peterson, 2010; Smolak, et al., 2014), and due to the paucity of current measures including situational and outcome variables in sexual encounters that may impact perceptions of sexual empowerment. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). A single score was attained by averaging the score across

all 4 items. The internal reliability for this measure was high ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The SBI provided a measure of functional sexual empowerment.

**Self-Evaluation Items (SEI).** Four statements regarding one's self-perception were presented. These included: I am attractive; other people find me attractive; I am empowered; I am sexually empowered. Each item was rated on a 6 point Likert scale (see Appendix F). The internal reliability for this measure was high ( $\alpha = .84$ ). The empowerment statement provided a comparison between psychological empowerment and sexual empowerment. It seemed unlikely that a woman who did not rate herself as psychologically empowered would endorse sexually empowered behavior. Responses to the statement about sexual empowerment were used to determine how respondents' responses on the ESS, SIPS, and SSBQ related to their assertions of sexual empowerment.

**Perceptions of definitions of sexual empowerment.** Three items were answered regarding their perception of the three descriptions of sexual empowerment: *power to*, *power over*, and multidimensional/continuous (see Appendix G). The extent to which they agreed with each definition was rated on a scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*).

## **Procedure**

Participants completed an anonymous online questionnaire that took approximately 10 minutes. The first page was the informed consent (see Appendix H). Next was a single question asking if participants met inclusion criteria (i.e., "I am a woman who is sexually attracted to men"), then demographic questions. Participants

completed the ESS, SIPS, amended SSBQ, SEI, and SBI. These 5 measures were counterbalanced to control for potential order effects. Perceptions of definitions of sexual empowerment were always the last measure. Finally, participants were presented a debriefing followed by an open dialog box in which participants had the opportunity to submit comments. They were thanked for their participation.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### Correlational Analyses

First, it was hypothesized that age would be negatively correlated with ESS. A Pearson's product moment correlation was calculated to evaluate this hypothesis. Contrary to our hypothesis, age and ESS mean score were not significantly correlated,  $r = .004$ ,  $n = 110$ ,  $p = .969$ . Second, it also was hypothesized that age would be positively correlated with SIPS, SSBQ, and SBI mean scores. Pearson's correlations also were calculated to evaluate this hypothesis. Age was not significantly correlated with either SIPS or SBI scores, however, age was significantly negatively correlated with SSBQ score,  $r = -.233$ ,  $n = 108$ ,  $p = .015$ , which was opposite of the predicted relationship (i.e., negative vs positive). Table 1 provides the correlations among each of the dependent variables.

Although no specific hypotheses were posed regarding the SBI and SEI, tools developed for this study, correlations between these tools and the other assessments were calculated. Although the ESS, SIPS, and SSBQ all significantly correlated with each other, the SBI, a proposed measure of functional empowerment (i.e., power over) was not significantly correlated with any of them. The SEI, however, was significantly positively correlated with all four other dependent variables (see Table 1).

Third, it was hypothesized that SBI score could be predicted based on participants' responses to ESS, SIPS, SEI, and SSBQ. Multiple regression was used to evaluate this hypothesis. This hypothesis was not supported (see Table 2).

### Age Group Comparisons

To assess potential age or developmental differences in sexual empowerment, age cohort groups were created. Participants were grouped roughly by decade: 18-29 year olds ( $n = 33$ ), 30-39 ( $n = 35$ ), 40-49 ( $n = 26$ ), and 50 and older ( $n = 20$ ). Prior to analyses, cohorts were compared on the demographics to determine group differences to identify potential covariates. Based on Chi-square analyses, no age cohort group differences were found for ethnicity,  $X^2(18) = 23.44$ ,  $p = .17$ , relationship status,  $X^2(6) = 2.19$ ,  $p = .90$ , or highest degree earned,  $X^2(12) = 9.12$ ,  $p = .62$ . Therefore, no covariates were used in subsequent analyses.

The four age cohort groups were compared on each dependent variable (see Table 3). Older cohorts were expected to endorse more engagement in sexually powerful (i.e., power over) behaviors (i.e., SBI) compared to the younger cohorts. Further, the younger cohort was predicted to endorse more sexually empowering (i.e., power to) feelings (i.e., ESS) than would the older cohorts. ANOVAs were conducted to compare the groups on these measures. No significant group differences were found. Age cohorts did not differ on SBI score,  $F(3, 98) = 1.07$ ,  $p = .37$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ , or on the ESS score,  $F(3, 98) = 0.39$ ,  $p = .76$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ .

Finally, although no specific hypotheses were predicted, ratings for each of the definitions of sexual empowerment were compared among age cohorts (see Table 4). A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the three ratings among the age cohorts. Results show the ratings were significantly different for all definitions of

sexual empowerment,  $F(1.7, 169.0) = 88.52$ ,  $G-G p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .47$ , with the highest ratings for the definition of sexual empowerment as a continuous, multidimensional construct. No significant differences in ratings were found for age cohort,  $F(3, 102) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .12$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ , or the interaction of age cohort and sexual empowerment definitions,  $F(5.0, 169.0) = 0.80$ ,  $G-G p = .55$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ .

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

A central goal of this project was to empirically assess a continuous, multidimensional model of sexual empowerment among heterosexual women. To accomplish this, tools purporting to measure *power to* and *power over* sexual empowerment were utilized, thus measuring the multidimensional aspect of the model. Responses to these tools were collected across age cohorts and compared, thus measuring the continuous aspect of the model. The ESS provided a measure of respondents' attitudes toward *power to* sexual attitudes. The SIPS and SSBQ provided measures of women's engagement with self-sexualizing attitudes and behaviors, which are often assessed as a proxy for *power over* sexual empowerment. To supplement a lack of survey questions regarding functional empowerment and sex-positive outcomes, the SBI was created and used to measure women's *power over* sexual behaviors. The SEI was designed for this study to assess a general perception of women's self-evaluations of attractiveness and empowerment. SEI items addressed what could have been confounding factors for some prompts, such as "My sex appeal helps me control men" in the SIPS; a respondent's beliefs about her own appearance might have influenced this response.

It was hypothesized that women's scores of functional empowerment and sex positive outcomes (i.e., SBI) could be predicted by their responses to other measures of *power to* attitudes (i.e., ESS) and *power over* attitudes and behaviors (i.e., SIPS, SSBQ). This hypothesis was not supported. The SBI did not significantly correlate with any of the other measures of sexual empowerment that purportedly measured subjective and

functional sexual empowerment. This suggests that the SBI is measuring a different construct, possibly *power over* sexual behavior in a way that the other tools are not. In addition, the SEI was significantly correlated with all other measures (ESS, SIPS, SSBQ, and SBI). These results imply that a primary factor related to one's perception of functional sexual empowerment and sex positive outcomes is the belief that one is attractive and has the subjective feeling that one is generally empowered. This aligns with Zimmerman's (1995) assertion that subjective empowerment is the foundation of functional empowerment. Moreover, these results raise questions about the conceptualization and operationalization of these constructs; the ESS, SIPS, and SSBQ might be valid measures of self-sexualization, but it might not be appropriate to extrapolate those conclusions to the construct of sexual empowerment.

According to Peterson's (2010) continuous multidimensional model of sexual empowerment, as women gain knowledge and experience with age, they will presumably endorse more functional *power over* sexual attitudes and behaviors. Hence, younger women could be expected to score higher on a *power to* measure (i.e., ESS), and older women could be expected to score higher on *power over* measures (i.e., SIPS, SSBQ, and SBI). These hypotheses were not supported in the current study. There were no significant score discrepancies on any of these measures across age cohorts. In addition, the SSBQ was negatively correlated with age, which was opposite of the predicted positive correlation. For this study, the SSBQ was categorized as a *power over* measure because it consists of behaviors that women do in order to influence men. However, an alternate explanation is that these behaviors adhere to the male-focused sexual



objectification of women rather than sexual self-expression or empowerment of women. This seems to support the argument that self-sexualization is not a reliable proxy for functional sexual empowerment.

Finally, it was predicted that women in this study would rate the definition of sexual empowerment as multidimensional and continuous as the most appealing of the three presented descriptions: a *power to* definition, a *power over* definition, and a continuous multidimensional definition. A pattern did emerge wherein women favored the continuous multidimensional definition, implying that this definition is judged by women to be relevant and relatable even though the results from the other assessment tools in this study do not validate its merits. The *power to* definition was endorsed second, followed by the *power over* definition, meaning that women agreed the *least* with the statement that choices and actions are more important than *feelings* of sexual empowerment. Anecdotally, one of the participants commented, “My experience of Sexual Empowerment has changed over time and is circumstantial for me. I would probably have answered a lot of these questions differently at different times in my life depending on things like the age of myself, the age of my children, how empowered I was feeling in my whole life at a given point etc.” There were no significant differences in the degrees to which age cohorts endorsed the three definitions of sexual empowerment.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The generalizability of the results of the study are limited by the sample and methods employed. Responses were collected via anonymous online questionnaires, and

there are inherent limitations to this form of data collection. There is self-selection bias; individuals opted to include themselves in this sample. Internet access was required to participate, which could be a limiting factor. Additionally, all responses were self-reported, with no direct observation or validation of their accuracy. Finally, the sample for this study is homogenous—primarily Caucasian, college educated heterosexual women in relationships—and is not representative of the population.

The construct of sexual empowerment is difficult to define, and researchers have not come to a consensus. Aspects of this construct, particularly functional *power over* sexual empowerment, is difficult to operationalize. A weakness of this study might lie in the tools used to assess the constructs of sexual empowerment. Existing tools (e.g., SIPS, SSBQ) measuring functional empowerment rely on self-sexualization, which is a controversial gauge of sexual empowerment (Erchull & Liss, 2014; Infanger et al., 2016; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, 2010; Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). But no alternative to self-sexualization has been presented to measure *power over* sexual attitudes or behaviors. Researchers suggest that women’s motivations are pivotal to determining functional empowerment, but researchers also question women’s degree of insight into their own attitudes and behaviors (Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Moran & Lee, 2014; Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). To complicate an already charged subject, almost everything related to sexual empowerment is open to interpretation. Even the word “empowerment” is subjective and open to personal exposition. Validly measuring a construct is formidable when accepted meanings and definitions do not exist. Operationalizing and measuring the various aspects of sexual empowerment seems to be

a worthy goal for future studies. In the current study, the SBI was constructed to attempt to assess sexual assertiveness and sex-positive outcomes. It is brief (4 items) and in the current study established high internal reliability and discriminant validity. I believe more energy should be invested in designing and evaluating tools such as this to operationalize functional *power over* sexual empowerment.

Although this study did not directly support the continuous aspect of Peterson's continuous multidimensional model of sexual empowerment, I believe that with accurate, targeted tools significant and informative comparisons between older and younger women would be discovered that could beneficially inform discussions of sexual empowerment. Some of the older participants in this study expressed excitement to be involved and were encouraging of this line of research.

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APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## Demographic Information

1. Age
  - Open-ended response
2. Relationship status
  - Single
  - In a relationship
  - Other
3. Ethnicity
  - White
  - Black or African American
  - American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - Asian
  - Hispanic/Latino
  - Middle Eastern
  - Multi-ethnic
  - Other
  - Prefer not to answer
4. Highest level of education
  - Some high school
  - High school graduate
  - Some college, no degree
  - Associate's degree
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's, Doctorate, or Professional Degree



## APPENDIX B

## Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale

Rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on a Likert scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree strongly	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree strongly

1. It is important to me that men are attracted to me.
2. I feel proud when men compliment the way I look.
3. I want men to look at me.
4. I love to feel sexy.
5. I like showing off my body.
6. I feel complimented when men whistle at me.
7. When I wear revealing clothing, I feel sexy and in control.
8. I feel empowered when I look beautiful.

## APPENDIX C

## Sex is Power Scale

Rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on a scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree strongly	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree strongly

## (S-SIPS)

1. I use my body to get what I want.
2. I can get what I want using my feminine wiles.
3. My sex appeal helps me control men.
4. If a man is attracted to me, I can usually get him to do what I want him to do.
5. I like to use my womanhood to my advantage.
6. My sexuality gives me power.
7. I lead men on sometimes, but it makes me feel good.

## (W-SIPS)

8. A beautiful woman can usually get what she wants.
9. Beauty gives women power.
10. Men are easily manipulated by beautiful women.
11. Women can use their looks to control men.
12. Women can control men through sex.

## APPENDIX D

## Self-Sexualization Behavior Questionnaire

Please indicate how often you do each of the following things specifically in order to influence men on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Most of the Time	Always

1. Wear cologne/perfume/scents
2. Style your hair
3. Remove or trim genital hair
4. Wear tight or fitted clothes
5. Wear dressy shirts or pants
6. Wear shorts or short skirts
7. Wear a low cut blouse or dress
8. Wear a special bra
9. Wear high heels
10. Wear specific jewelry

## APPENDIX E

## Sexual Behavior Items

Rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on a scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree strongly	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree strongly

1. I initiate sexual encounters with a partner.
2. I communicate my needs and preferences during sexual activities with a partner.
3. I achieve orgasm during sexual activity with a partner.
4. I am satisfied with my sexual encounters with a partner.

## APPENDIX F

## Self-Evaluation Items

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Rate on a scale of 1  
(*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree strongly	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree strongly

1. I am attractive.
2. Other people find me attractive.
3. I am empowered.
4. I am sexually empowered.

## APPENDIX G

## Perceptions of Definitions of Sexual Empowerment

The sexual empowerment of women has been described in various ways. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following descriptions. Rate on a scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree strongly	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree strongly

1. Sexual empowerment is a subjective experience, meaning that if a woman *feels* sexually empowered, she is. Actions are not as important as feelings.
2. Sexual empowerment is a behavioral experience, meaning that it is evident only in a woman's choices and actions; *feeling* empowered isn't enough.
3. Sexual empowerment is a continuous, multidimensional experience, meaning that sexual empowerment changes across a woman's lifetime and depends on many factors. At different times and/or in different situations, one woman can feel and/or behave in empowered or disempowered ways.

## APPENDIX H

## IRB Approval Letter

**IRB****INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Office of Research Compliance,  
010A Sam Ingram Building,  
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



## IRBN007 – EXEMPTION DETERMINATION NOTICE

Monday, March 12, 2018

Investigator(s): Leanne Ring; Kimberly Ujcich Ward  
Investigator(s) Email(s): Lmr5j@mtmail.mtsu.edu; Kimberly.Ward@mtsu.edu  
Department: Psychology

Study Title: Exploring Women's Sexual Empowerment Across the Lifespan  
Protocol ID: **18-1192**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXEMPT** review mechanism under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) within the research category (2) *Educational Tests*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

IRB Action	EXEMPT from further IRB review***
Date of expiration	<b>NOT APPLICABLE</b>

Participant Size	180 [One Hundred Eightly]	
Participant Pool	<b>Adults 18+</b>	
Mandatory Restrictions	1. Participants must be age 18+ 2. Informed consent must be obtained 3. Identifying data may not be collected	
Additional Restrictions	<b>NONE</b>	
Comments	NONE	
Amendments	<b>Date</b>	<b>Post-Approval Amendments</b> NONE

\*\*\*This exemption determination only allows above defined protocol from further IRB review such as continuing review. However, the following post-approval requirements still apply:

- Addition/removal of subject population should not be implemented without IRB approval
- Change in investigators must be notified and approved
- Modifications to procedures must be clearly articulated in an addendum request and the proposed changes must not be incorporated without an approval
- Be advised that the proposed change must comply within the requirements for exemption
- Changes to the research location must be approved – appropriate permission letter(s) from external institutions must accompany the addendum request form
- Changes to funding source must be notified via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))
- The exemption does not expire as long as the protocol is in good standing

IRBN007                      Version 1.2  
Office of Compliance

Revision Date 03.08.2016 Institutional Review Board  
Middle Tennessee State University

- Project completion must be reported via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))
- Research-related injuries to the participants and other events must be reported within 48 hours of such events to [compliance@mtsu.edu](mailto:compliance@mtsu.edu)

The current MTSU IRB policies allow the investigators to make the following types of changes to this protocol without the need to report to the Office of Compliance, as long as the proposed changes do not result in the cancellation of the protocols eligibility for exemption:

- Editorial and minor administrative revisions to the consent form or other study documents
- Increasing/decreasing the participant size

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all applicable postapproval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website](#). Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident.



All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, current & past investigator information, training certificates, survey instruments and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board  
Middle Tennessee State University

## APPENDIX I

## Tables

Table 1

*Correlations among Dependent Variables*

<i>Variable</i>	ESS	SIPS	SSBQ	SBI	SEI
<b>Age</b>					
Pearson Correlation	.004	-.044	-.233*	.015	.116
Sig (2-tailed)	.969	.649	.015	.874	.223
N	110	111	108	110	113
<b>ESS</b>					
Pearson Correlation		.552**	.534**	.131	.436**
Sig (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.162	.000
N		116	111	115	116
<b>SIPS</b>					
Pearson Correlation			.338**	.077	.280**
Sig (2-tailed)			.000	.411	.002
N			113	117	118
<b>SSBQ</b>					
Pearson Correlation				.094	.197*
Sig (2-tailed)				.324	.036
N				113	114
<b>SBI</b>					
Pearson Correlation					.399**
Sig (2-tailed)					.000
N					117

Note. ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; SIPS = Sex is Power Scale; SSBQ = Self-Sexualizing Behavior Questionnaire; SBI = Sexual Behavior Items; SEI = Self Evaluation Items.

Table 2

*Standardized Linear Regression Model for Predicting SBI*

Model	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Mean rating for ESS	-.142	-1.077	.284
Mean rating for SIPS	.022	.201	.841
Mean rating for SSBQ	.467	4.474	.000
Mean rating for SEI	-.009	-.099	.921

Dependent Variable: Mean rating for SBI

Note. ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; SIPS = Sex is Power Scale; SSBQ = Self-Sexualizing Behavior Questionnaire; SEI = Self Evaluation Items; SBI = Sexual Behavior Items.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables by Full Sample and by Age Cohort*

Variable	Full Sample	18-29	30-39	40-49	50+
		Cohort	Cohort	Cohort	Cohort
	N = 114	N = 33	N = 35	N = 26	N = 20
	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>
ESS	3.72 (.85)	3.72 (.16)	3.68 (.16)	3.90 (.18)	3.64 (.21)
SIPS	3.34 (.84)	3.37 (.15)	3.65 (.15)	3.04 (.17)	3.48 (.20)
SSBQ	2.92 (.93)	3.25 (.16)	2.91 (.16)	2.72 (.19)	2.81 (.22)
SBI	4.63 (.98)	4.48 (.18)	4.68 (.18)	4.89 (.21)	4.40 (.25)
SEI	4.48 (.83)	4.38 (.15)	4.44 (.15)	4.50 (.17)	4.63 (.20)

Note. ESS = Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale; SIPS = Sex is Power Scale; SSBQ = Self-Sexualizing Behavior Questionnaire; SBI = Sexual Behavior Items; SEI = Self-Evaluation Items

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics for Sexual Empowerment Definitions by Full Sample and by Age Cohort*

Variable	Full Sample	18-29 Cohort	30-39 Cohort	40-49 Cohort	50+ Cohort
	N = 114	N = 33	N = 35	N = 26	N = 20
	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>
Power To	4.23 (1.22)	4.13 (.22)	4.61 (.22)	4.09 (.25)	3.82 (.29)
Power Over	3.03 (1.08)	2.97 (.20)	3.07 (.20)	3.09 (.24)	3.12 (.27)
Continuous Multidimensional	5.14 (.82)	4.87 (.15)	5.26 (.15)	5.26 (.17)	5.24(.20)

Note. Power To definition: Sexual empowerment is a subjective experience, meaning that if a woman *feels* sexually empowered, she is. Actions are not as important as feelings. Power Over definition: Sexual empowerment is a behavioral experience, meaning that it is evident only in a woman's choices and actions; *feeling* empowered isn't enough. Continuous Multidimensional definition: Sexual empowerment is a continuous, multidimensional experience, meaning that sexual empowerment changes across a woman's lifetime and depends on many factors. At different times and/or in different situations, one woman can feel and/or behave in empowered or disempowered ways.