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Images of powerful women in the age of 'choice feminism'

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A number of scholars and journalists have argued that Western culture has become 'sexualized'. Both women and men, they maintain, are highly sexualized in popular media. At the same time, scholars have examined the sexualization of women as part of a broader cultural 'backlash' against the gains of second-wave feminism and women's increasing power in society. We contribute to both of these fields with a longitudinal content analysis of four decades of *Rolling Stone* magazine covers. First, we analyze whether both women and men have become more sexualized over time and, if so, whether such increases have been proportionate. Second, we examine whether there is a relationship between women's increasing power in the music industry (as measured by popularity) and their sexualization on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. In the first case, we do not find evidence that US culture as a whole has become sexualized, as only women – but not men – have become both more frequently and more intensely sexualized on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. In the second case, we find evidence that sexualized images may be part of a backlash against women's gains since, as women musicians' popularity increased, they were increasingly sexualized and under-represented on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

Keywords: gender; media; sexualization; feminism; popular culture; body

Introduction

In recent years, a number of scholars and journalists have argued that Western culture has become 'sexualized' (American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force 2007, Attwood 2009, Olfman 2009) or even 'pornified' (Paul 2005, see also McRobbie 2004, Paasonen *et al.* 2007, Dines 2010). Both women (Levy 2005, Gill 2007) and men (Bordo 1999, Pope *et al.* 2000, Rohlinger 2002), they maintain, are highly sexualized in popular media. Evidence for this trend comes from wide-ranging cultural phenomena, including the rise of 'lad mags' and the mainstreaming of pornography, the popularity of 'voluptuous vixens and macho males' in video games, and the widespread sexualization of men and women in advertising (McRobbie 2004, Levy 2005, Paul 2005, Reichert and Lambiase 2006, Smith and Moyer-Gusé 2006, APA Task Force 2007, Ezzell 2009, Farley 2009, Dines 2010).

At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has examined the sexualization of women as part of a broader cultural 'backlash' against the gains of second-wave feminism and women's increasing power in society (e.g. Faludi 1991). Sexualized portrayals of

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women, it is argued, are a way to 'manage' and 'contain' their power (Kane 1996). In addition, scholars find, women must portray themselves in a sexualized fashion in order to be successful, as well as to 'compensate' for their success, particularly in traditionally masculine careers such as law and business (Pierce 1995, Shuler 2003), professional sport (Kane 1996, Lowe 1998, Messner and Cooky 2010), and the music industry (Jhally 2007).

We contribute to both of these fields with a longitudinal content analysis of four decades of *Rolling Stone* magazine covers. First, we examine whether US culture (as seen through this magazine) has become broadly sexualized, and, second, we examine whether the sexualization of women might be part of a broader backlash against women's recent economic and cultural gains. In order to test the first hypothesis, we analyze whether women and men on the cover of *Rolling Stone* have become more sexualized over time and, if so, whether such increases have been proportionate. Our findings do not support this argument. We find that there has been relatively little change in sexualized images of men since the 1960s but that sexualized images of women have increased dramatically – both in frequency and intensity. In order to test the second hypothesis, we examine whether there is a relationship between women's increasing power in the music industry (as measured by popularity) and their sexualization on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Our findings offer clear support for this argument, demonstrating that as women musicians gained in popularity, they were increasingly sexualized (and, in fact, hypersexualized), while also being disproportionately absent from the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

Our analysis suggests that the sexualization of women is a powerful tool for managing women in an age of 'choice feminism', in which anything that women do is cast as 'feminist' – including 'choosing' to drop out of the labor force to become a housewife, pose nude on magazine covers, or participate in and enjoy pornography (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, Hirshman 2005, Levy 2005, Ferguson 2010, Snyder-Hall 2010). That women can 'choose' to be portrayed as sex objects is presented as a victory for feminism (see Ferguson 2010, Snyder-Hall 2010). We argue, however, that analyses of sexualization must move beyond questions of individual choice to examine the social forces that shape and constrain it. Indeed, whether or not women 'choose' to be sexualized, the sheer repetition of their sexualization, in combination with the intensity of their sexualization, suggests that there may be very little that is 'individual' about such choices.

The sexualization of women in popular media

Over the last several decades, the sexualization of women in popular media has intermittently been the subject of intense cultural and political debate. This debate came to the fore in the 1960s and 1970s, as second-wave feminists made sexualized images of women an explicit target of their political activism (Hollows and Moseley 2006, Rosen 2006). In 1968, for example, feminist activists staged a highly public protest at the Miss America Pageant which, they argued, epitomized 'the degrading mindless-boob-girlie symbol' (Douglas 1994, p. 157) that dominated images of women in popular media. In addition, feminists organized campaigns to cover advertisements which they deemed objectifying with stickers and graffiti that read 'This ad exploits women' (Castro 1990, Bradley 2004). And some activists even established alternative forms of media to create public spaces for feminist dialogues that were free of such exploitative imagery (Farrell 1998, Rosen 2006).

A number of feminist scholars, too, turned their attention to the sexualization of women in the media. Andrea Dworkin (1979), for instance, strongly criticized the

objectification of women in pornography, linking it to rape and child sexual abuse. Likewise, Catherine MacKinnon (1985) linked pornography to social gender inequality. Their studies helped launch an on-going scholarly debate not only about pornography, but also about women's agency and the meaning of sexuality.

Partly in response to these feminist critiques, advertisers and other popular media outlets in the US and the UK began to modify their portrayal of women in the late 1980s and 1990s (Goldman 1992, Gill 2007). Popular representations of the demurely submissive housewife – the iconic (though not the only) portrayal of women in the postwar era – receded and have increasingly been replaced with images of women who aggressively flaunt their bodies and their sexuality (Goldman 1992, Gill 2007). What's more, these new representations of women as sexual aggressors are often marketed with the feminist language of agency, choice, 'girl power', and empowerment (Karlyn 2006, Gill 2007, Fudge 2006, Zeisler 2008). In this new media regime, according to Goldman (1992, p. 133), 'meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their "liberated" interests'.

Since then, a number of scholars and journalists have argued that, in the US and UK at least, popular culture has become sexualized more generally. Not only are women sexualized, they argue, men too have become sexualized objects in an increasingly sexualized culture (Bordo 1999, Pope *et al.* 2000, Rohlinger 2002). Bordo (1999, p. 30) for example observes that the 'blatant sexual fetishization – even idolatry – of the male organ' has become commonplace in popular television shows and movies. This sexualization of men, scholars argue, has had far-reaching effects: men have become 'obsessed' with their appearance, and, more than ever before, their bodies have come to play a key role in cultural conceptions of masculinity (Bordo 1999, Pope *et al.* 2000, Slevin and Linneman 2010). As Bordo (1999, p. 217) notes, 'I never dreamed that "equality" would move in the direction of men worrying *more* about their looks rather than women worrying less' (emphasis in original).

Recent research in the UK and US has argued that both men and women are sexualized in the popular media and, as a result, both men and women use sexuality to construct their identities.[1] Indeed, in popular culture at least, the media have come to be seen as something of an 'equal opportunity' objectifier (e.g. Taylor and Sharkey 2003, Frette 2009), in which both men and women are constructed as sexual objects. In short, it is argued, mainstream media – and with it, mainstream culture – have become 'pornified' (McRobbie 2004, Paul 2005, Paasonen *et al.* 2007, Dines 2010).

The sexualization of women as backlash

At the same time, a number of scholars have examined the sexualization of women in popular media as part of a broader cultural 'backlash' against the gains of second-wave feminism (e.g. Faludi 1991, Lawler 2002, see also Honey 1984). Sexualized portrayals of women, they argue, are a way to 'manage' and 'contain' women's increasing power in the public realm, especially those women who have gained success in traditionally masculine spheres.

Much of this literature focuses on the representation of women athletes since the enactment of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded activities, most notably college sports. For example, Kane (1996) argues that media coverage of women athletes denies them power in two fundamental ways: first, by under-representing them (see also Messner and Cooky 2010) and, second, by over-emphasizing their femininity, sexuality, and appearance, rather than their physical ability

and success. In contrast to men athletes who are shown in ways that 'emphasize their athletic strength and competence', Kane (1996, p. 102) writes, women athletes are shown 'off the court, out of uniform, and in highly passive and sexualized poses' (see also Duncan 1990, Knight and Giuliano 2003). Not only are women athletes sexualized through images, they are also sexualized through commentators' descriptions of, for instance, their 'long beautiful legs' or 'soaking wet t-shirts' during their athletic performances (Kane 1996, p. 113). This pervasive sexualization of women athletes, Kane (1996, p. 107) argues, amounts to their 'symbolic annihilation' in popular culture.

Scholars find evidence for this in other domains as well. For example, Shuler (2003) finds that images of women corporate executives – much like those of women athletes – emphasize their femininity, attractiveness, or sexuality, rather than their business acumen and success. Instead of showing them in the office (or in the public sphere at all), women executives are frequently shown in their homes (often with their children). Moreover, Shuler (2003) notes, they are portrayed as 'soft' and 'feminine' or, alternately, as seductive and sexualized. The same is true for women in the music industry; as Jhally (2007) observes, many women artists – such as Jewel, Mariah Carey, and Jessica Simpson – entered the music scene with relatively orthodox appearances but soon adopted highly sexualized personas in order to gain greater visibility and, thus, success (see also Schilt 2003). Scholars refer to this as 'the feminine apologetic', that is, the strategic use of sexualized appearance both to attain and to 'compensate' for one's success (Duncan 1990, Lowe 1998, Lawler 2002, Knight and Giuliano 2003).

Methodological issues in studies of sexualization

Given the on-going cultural debates over media representations of women and the meanings of sexuality, it is not surprising that women's sexualization in popular culture is widely studied. However, attempts to examine this phenomenon suffer from two key problems: First, they frequently rely on limited data and, second, they measure sexualization by counting exposed body parts. In the first case, for example, studies of sexualization often rely on limited data sets, such as analyzing only one year of images (e.g. Krassas *et al.* 2003), or using a small sample (e.g. Lindner 2004) or just two years from different decades to measure change over time (e.g. Kang 1997). Second, and more importantly, such studies measure sexualization by examining the presence or absence of individual sexualized attributes in isolation. Indeed, most studies use variables such as nudity or breast exposure as a proxy for sexualization (e.g. Kang 1997, Krassas *et al.* 2003, Lindner 2004, Paek and Nelson 2007, Baumann 2008). Thus, while they document the incidence of sexualized attributes, these studies do not measure whether the image as a whole has become more frequently or more intensely sexualized over time.

The current study seeks to remedy these methodological problems. First, we create a 'scale of sexualization' to measure whether an image as a whole has been sexualized and, second, we apply this scale to over 1000 images of men and women across 43 years of *Rolling Stone* covers. In doing so, we are able to extend the literature described above, first analyzing whether US culture has become 'sexualized' and, second, whether sexualized images signify the management of women and compensate for their success.

Data and methods

Rolling Stone is a well-known popular culture magazine in the US that features a wide variety of cultural icons, both within and beyond the music industry. Launched in 1967,

Rolling Stone has published more than one thousand covers across its life-span. This extensive data set thus offers a useful window into changes in how women and men are portrayed in popular culture over time.

Starting with its first issue in November of 1967 to the end of 2009, there have been 1046 covers of *Rolling Stone* (including those issues with multiple covers). We excluded 115 of these covers from our analysis because they did not portray people (that is, that they used solely text or cartoon characters), they showed crowds with no central image to code, or they featured collages of covers that had previously been published. Of the remaining 931 covers, 651 featured only men and 205 featured only women (either alone or in groups). Another 75 covers featured women and men together. In those covers that showed more than one person of the same gender, we coded only the central figure in the image, and in those covers that featured both men and women, we coded the central man and woman separately. We thus analyzed 1006 cover images (726 images of men and 280 images of women) across 42 years of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

In order to test the 'sexualization of culture' hypothesis, we first analyzed changes in the sexualization of men and women over time. In order to do so, we created a 'scale of sexualization' that consists of 11 separate variables, each with their own point value, the sum of which indicates the degree to which an image is sexualized. We briefly describe each of the variables below (see Hatton and Trautner 2011 for a more detailed discussion of our coding and methods).

Clothing/nudity (0–5 points): Based on previous studies that found style of clothing and extent of nudity to be important markers of sexualization (e.g. Soley and Kurzbard 1986, Soley and Reid 1988, Kang 1997, Reichert *et al.* 1999, Krassas *et al.* 2003, Reichert 2003, Reichert and Carpenter 2004, Lambiase and Reichert 2006, Johnson 2007, Nitz *et al.* 2007, Paek and Nelson 2007), we developed a six-point scale for this variable, ranging from unrevealing clothing (0 points) to completely naked (5 points).

Touch (0–3 points): Based on research that has examined the use of 'touch' to suggest sexualization in media images (e.g. Soley and Kurzbard 1986, Reichert *et al.* 1999, Reichert and Carpenter 2004), we measured touch (including self touch, touching others, being touched) on a 0–3 scale, ranging from no touching at all (0 points) to explicitly sexualized touching, such as pinching someone's nipples (3 points).

Pose (0–2 points): We developed this variable to measure a cover image's pose using a three-point scale, ranging from those cover models that were standing upright (0 points) to those that were overtly posed for sexual activity, such as lying down on a bed (2 points).

Mouth (0–2 points): We created a three-point scale to measure the cover models' mouths, ranging from those that did not suggest any kind of sexual activity, such as closed lips, broad toothy smiles, and active singing, talking, or yelling (0 points), to those cover models whose mouths were explicitly suggestive of sexual activity (2 points), which included models whose mouths were wide open but passive (not actively singing or yelling but, perhaps, posed for penetration), whose tongue was showing, or who had something (such as a finger) in his or her mouth.

Breasts/chest; genitals; buttocks (0–2 points each): Based on previous studies that examined whether a focal point of the image is the model's breasts/chest, genitals, and/or buttocks (e.g. Krassas *et al.* 2001, 2003, Rohlinger 2002), we analyzed each of these variables separately on a 0–2 scale. Scores for these variables ranged from 0 points for those images in which these body parts were either not visible or not a focal point of the image to 2 points for those images in which these body parts were a major focus (such as if a model's pants were unbuttoned and being pushed down).

Text (0–2 points): We developed a three-point variable to measure the text describing the cover image. Scores ranged from 0 points for 'coverlines' that were not related to sex or sexuality to 2 points for those that made explicit sexual references.

Head versus body shot (0–1 point): Based on previous studies which distinguished between images that are primarily head shots and those that feature a substantial portion of the model's body (e.g. Goffman 1979, Schwarz and Kurz 1989, Lambiase and Reichert 2006, Johnson 2007, Baumann 2008), we included a binary measure for this variable, in which head shots scored 0 points and body shots scored 1 point.

Sex act (0–1 point): We created this variable to measure whether the cover model was engaged in sexual activity. An image scored 0 points if the cover model was not engaged in sexual activity and 1 point if he/she were engaged in a sex act (such as kissing) or simulating a sex act (such as affecting fellatio or masturbation).

Sexual role-play (0–1 point): Finally, we developed a two-point variable to measure whether the image portrayed symbols of sexual role-play. An image scored 0 points if it featured no such symbols, and 1 point if it featured elements of either infantilization (e.g. an adult wearing child-like clothes) or bondage/domination (e.g. a model wearing a leather bustier, leather straps, dog collars, or studded bracelets).

We coded the covers of *Rolling Stone* in several phases. Initially, the authors worked together to develop the coding rules for all variables, jointly coding three randomly selected years of covers. The second author then coded the remaining cover images, working closely with the first author to resolve any questions that arose. We then randomly selected 10% of the covers ($n = 93$), not including those we had coded together or images which had been in question, to code independently as a reliability check. Our Cohen's kappa reliability scores were perfect (1.00, $P < .001$) for three variables ('genitals', 'sexual role-play', and 'sex act') and indicated substantial agreement for the remaining variables (see Landis and Koch 1977), ranging from .707 ('buttocks'; $P < .001$) to .891 ('clothing'; $P < .001$).

After coding was complete, the authors grouped the images' scores into three distinct categories: non-sexualized images (which scored 0–4 points), sexualized images (5–9 points), and hypersexualized images (10 or more points). We then tested for reliability between coders for these three categories as well. In our 10% random sample of covers, there was near-perfect agreement between the authors' categorization of the images as non-sexualized, sexualized, and hypersexualized: kappa was found to be .972 ($P < .001$). We use this analysis to test the hypothesis that US culture has become sexualized.

Next, in order to test the 'backlash' thesis, we narrowed our analysis to women musicians on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. First, we charted the number of women musicians as a proportion of all covers of *Rolling Stone*, as well as the proportion of images of men musicians on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Second, we re-ran the above sexualization analyses on covers featuring women musicians.

We then compared the representation and sexualization of women musicians to their changing popularity in the US. In order to do so, we measured their popularity by charting the yearly proportion of number-one songs by women from 1967 to 2009, as recorded by the *Billboard* 'Hot 100'. Published weekly by *Billboard* magazine since 1958, the 'Hot 100' list uses data compiled by Nielsen SoundScan about songs' weekly airplay and sales to determine the number-one song for every week in every year (available at *Billboard*'s website, http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100#). Thus, there are 52 number-one hits each year, though some songs hold the number-one slot for multiple weeks. In our analysis, then, if women musicians hold the number-one slot for 26 weeks in a given year, they account for 50% of the number-one songs. In calculating the popularity of women

musicians, we included in our count those songs performed by women solo artists (e.g. Diana Ross, Beyoncé, or Britney Spears), songs by bands with one or more women as a lead vocalist (e.g. Destiny's Child, Fleetwood Mac, or The Eurythmics), and songs performed by women and men jointly (i.e. those that were listed as being sung by, for instance, Patti LaBelle *and* Michael McDonald, but not those that were listed as 'featuring' women in a smaller role).

Findings

In order to test both the 'sexualization of culture' and 'backlash' hypotheses, we offer two sets of analyses in this paper. First, in order to examine the hypothesis that US culture as a whole has become more sexualized, we present findings regarding changes in the frequency and intensity of sexualized images of men and women over time. Second, in order to test whether sexualized images of women are part of a broader cultural backlash, we narrow our focus to women musicians and present findings regarding the frequency of their representation, as well as the frequency and intensity of their sexualization, on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in the context of their changing popularity in the US.

The sexualization of culture? Images of men and women on the cover of Rolling Stone

In analyses presented elsewhere (see Hatton and Trautner 2011), we examine the frequency and intensity of the sexualisation of men and women on the cover of *Rolling Stone* over time. Our results, presented in Figure 1 below, show that men and women are not equally sexualized. Indeed, men are typically not sexualized to any degree: Fully 83% of images of men in the 2000s were not sexualized, representing only a slight decrease
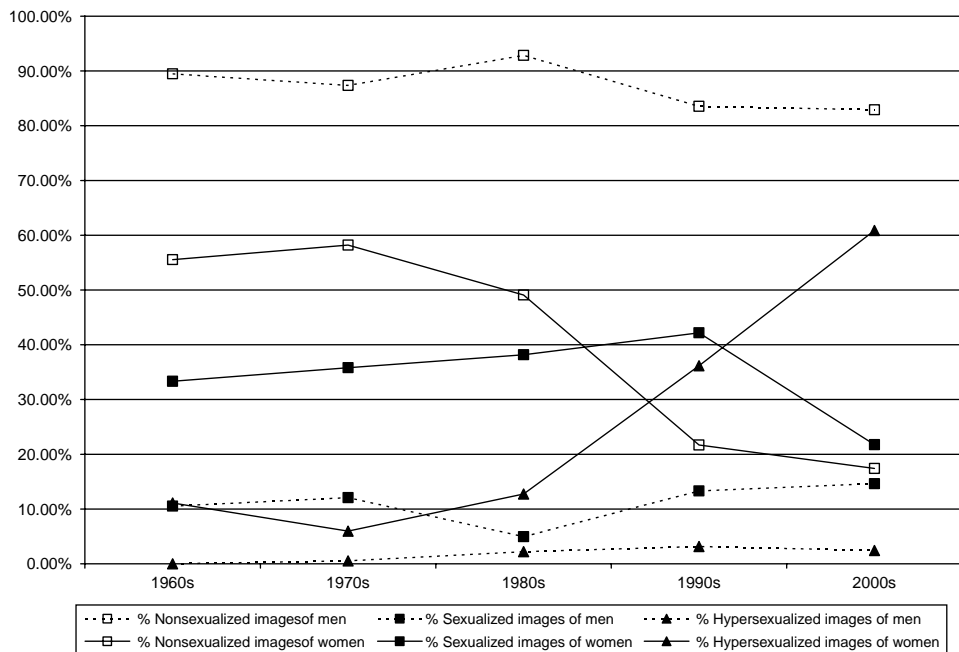
Figure 1.   Frequency and intensity of sexualization of men and women.

from the 1960s, when 89% of men were not sexualized. Another 15% of men in the 2000s were sexualized, and just 2% were hypersexualized on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

Thus women have always been more sexualized than men on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, but the gap between them has increased substantially in recent years. Indeed, this gap has grown on two fronts: First, women are increasingly sexualized more often than men and, second, women are increasingly sexualized more intensely than men. For example, in the 1960s 33% of women were sexualized (none of whom were hypersexualized). By the 2000s, however, 83% of women on the cover of *Rolling Stone* were sexualized, including some 61% which were *hyper*sexualized. Only 17% of women's images in the 2000s were non-sexualized, the same proportion of men who were sexualized to some degree.

Thus, our findings do not support the hypothesis that US culture as a whole has become more sexualized. There remains a dramatic difference in portrayals of men and women, and, in fact, the gap has grown wider, not narrower. While women have become both more frequently and more intensely sexualized, men have not.

Backlash against powerful women? Images of women musicians

The previous analyses demonstrate that women but, for the most part, not men are sexualized on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. This leads us to consider our second hypothesis: whether the sexualization of women is, in part, an effort to 'manage' women in an era of increasing power and rights. Thus, in this section, we examine only those covers that feature women musicians, arguably the most 'powerful' group of women featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

First, we examine the frequency of their representation, following Kane's (1996) and Messner and Cooky's (2010) analyses of women athletes. Since the magazine's inception, a total of 160 covers have featured women musicians; by contrast, 509 covers have featured men musicians. The rate at which women musicians are shown on *Rolling Stone*, however, has not changed dramatically over the years. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of women musicians has hovered between 13% and 17% of all images. The proportion of men musicians has been fairly consistent as well, as they are featured on about half of *Rolling Stone's* covers each decade (with the exception of the 1960s in which they were 72% of all covers).

In Figure 2, we graph the frequency of representation of women musicians against two other trend lines: the sexualization of women musicians (which includes both sexualized and hypersexualized portrayals) and the broader popularity of women musicians in US culture.

Looking at the line in the middle of the chart, we see that women musicians have become increasingly popular over time. In the 1960s, only 18.5% of number-one hits were

Table 1.   Frequency of images of women and men musicians on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

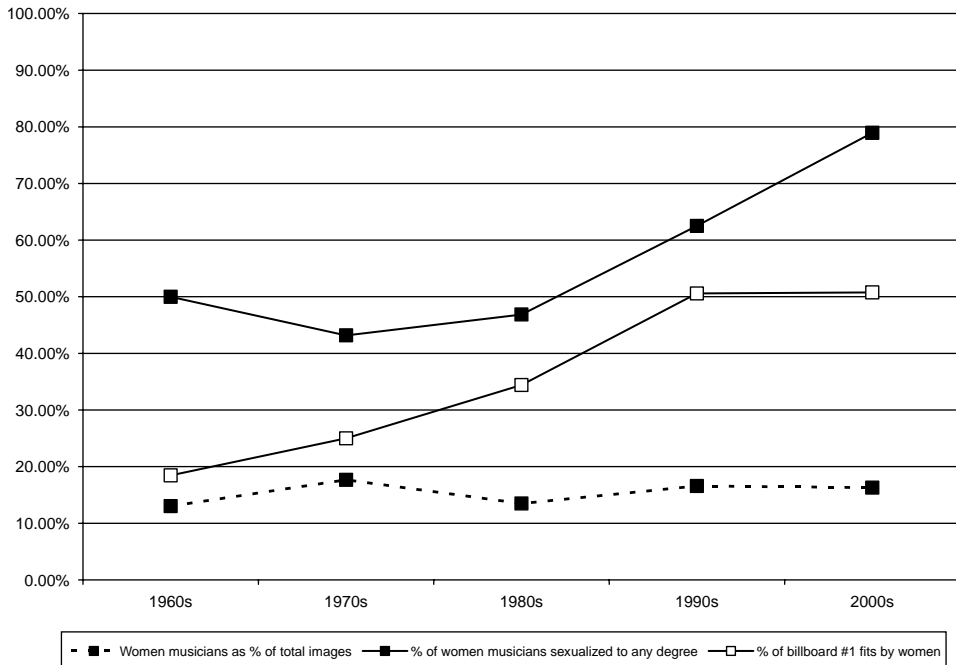| Decade	Number of women musicians	Women musicians as percent of all images	Number of men musicians	Men musicians as percent of all images
1960s	6	13.0%	33	71.7%
1970s	44	17.7%	128	51.4%
1980s	32	13.5%	115	48.5%
1990s	40	16.6%	113	46.9%
2000s	38	16.3%	120	51.5%

Figure 2.   Women musicians: frequency of representation, sexualization, and popularity.

performed by women; by the 2000s, however, that percentage had increased to 50.8%. But, in the 2000s, only 16% of *Rolling Stone*'s covers portrayed women musicians, as shown by the dotted line at the bottom of the chart. Thus, despite women musicians' gains in popularity – so much so that fully half of number-one hits across the 1990s and 2000s were performed by women – their representation on the cover of *Rolling Stone* has not increased.

Even more striking, perhaps, is the sexualization of women musicians. The solid line at the top of the chart represents the percentage of women musicians who are sexualized to any degree (which includes both sexualized and hypersexualized images on our scale). As shown in Figure 2, the sexualization of women musicians dropped slightly from the 1960s through the 1980s, at the same time as women musicians gained steadily in popularity from 18.5% to 34.4% of number-one hits. But, in the 1990s, both of these numbers increased substantially: Women musicians jumped in popularity by 50%, gaining slightly over half of the top hits, while their rates of sexualization increased by 34%, so that 62.5% of women musicians on the cover of *Rolling Stone* were sexualized. Through the 2000s, women musicians maintained their ground, performing just over half of all number-one hits, but their rates of sexualization continued to rise: By the 2000s, nearly 79% of women musicians were sexualized on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.

If we take the *intensity* of their sexualization into account, the increasing sexualization of women musicians is even more dramatic. In the 1960s, none of the women musicians on the cover of *Rolling Stone* were hypersexualized. This increased to 4.5% and 6.3% in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. Then, in the 1990s, the proportion of hypersexualized women musicians doubled to 12.5%, and in the 2000s it increased nearly 500%, so that 58% of women musicians on the cover of *Rolling Stone* were hypersexualized.

Taken together, these trends offer support for the hypothesis that sexualization, along with under-representation, may be an important tool for managing the increasing power of women in the music industry.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have shown a dramatic increase in the frequency and intensity of the sexualization of women – and, in particular, women musicians – on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. One might argue that this is simply part and parcel of a broader sexualization of US culture. Yet men and male musicians are not sexualized as frequently or as intensely as women. Furthermore, as women musicians' popularity increased, proportionately fewer of them appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. And those who did appear on the cover were increasingly sexualized. Our findings thus offer preliminary evidence that powerful women are being 'managed' and their 'threat' is being suppressed through sexualization and lack of representation in popular media outlets such as *Rolling Stone*.

The sexualization of women is a particularly powerful a tool in this age of 'choice feminism' (or what some call 'post-feminism'), which casts as 'feminist' anything that women do – including 'choosing' to get breast implants, pose nude on magazine covers, or starve themselves. Instead of being interpreted as objectification as was argued in the 1970s, such images are often interpreted today – in popular culture, at least – as a valid, even feminist, 'choice' of the cover models themselves (see, e.g., Ferguson 2010, Snyder-Hall 2010). Popular media have both cultivated and capitalized on this view by using the feminist language of agency and empowerment to sell sexualized images of women (Goldman 1992, Karlyn 2006, Gill 2007, Fudge 2006, Zeisler 2008).

A telling example of this, Zeisler (2008) notes, is the reality television show *The Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll*. The Pussycat Dolls, best known for their highly sexualized attire that relies heavily on leather lingerie and fish-net stockings, participated in a show in which nine women competed to become the newest member of the band. Over the course of eight weeks on national television, the competitors undertook a series of challenges – which included dancing in a glass cage in a public restaurant while wearing only lingerie – in order to become the next 'Doll'. The contestants did not interpret such challenges as objectifying – just the opposite. As described by one of the contestants, the show 'was all about empowerment' and an executive producer agreed, proclaiming that the show was 'a snapshot of the contemporary woman being everything she can be' (Zeisler 2008, p. 130).

Yet, even as the women chose to compete to become the next 'Doll', and even as they chose to be portrayed as sexual objects in so doing, it has been argued – and on the basis of our findings we must agree – that this does not represent real empowerment (Zeisler 2008, Meltzer 2010). As Levy (2005, p. 81) observes, this 'new feminism' looks a lot like 'old objectification'. Moreover, as our findings demonstrate, the debate over whether such portrayals of women are objectifying or empowering must move beyond the question of individual choice. This is because, whether or not women 'choose' to be sexualized, the sheer repetition of their sexualization *in combination with* the intensity of their sexualization (but not that of men) suggests that there is very little that is 'individual' about such choices. Instead, we argue, it is necessary to identify the social forces that shape and constrain individual choice.

We do not, however, consider sexualized images of women to be uniformly negative, nor do we wish to obscure the differences in how women are sexualized (Attwood 2009, Gill 2009, Lerum and Dworkin 2009, Vanwesenbeeck 2009). Yet, as our findings show,

what we are seeing is an increasingly homogeneous *hyper*sexualized portrait of women in general, and powerful and successful women, in particular. This point can be illustrated with a simple thought experiment: Imagine a picture of a woman in a bikini. Such an image might be interpreted in a variety of ways – sexy, powerful, bold, agentic, and/or objectifying. But now imagine that, in this image, the bikini-clad woman is sucking on her fingers, pushing up her breast, lying down, and spreading her legs. The range of interpretations for this image is now vastly reduced: She is being shown as an instrument for sex. As our research suggests, this type of image dominates media portrayals of women, but not men.

Yet more research needs to be done. At a micro-level, it would be important to understand how editors make decisions about magazine covers and content. At the meso-level, we hope to see more analyses of the sexualization of men and women in popular culture, particularly those which move beyond anecdotal evidence to measure differences between groups and change over time. Such analyses could fruitfully explore a wide range of popular media, including those directed at children and non-Caucasian audiences. Such analyses could also measure differences in sexualization by race and ethnicity, as well as across cultures. By identifying these kinds of broad cultural patterns, this research will shift the debate away from the individual to identify the institutional forces that normalize an environment in which women are routinely hypersexualized.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. Connell's (1987) and Riviere's (1929) studies provide micro-level insight to show how sexuality is 'done' by individuals. Our paper, in contrast, argues for the need to go beyond what individuals 'choose' in order to highlight some of the broader forces that shape those choices. As a result, Riviere's concept of womanliness as masquerade and Connell's work on doing gender and emphasized femininity, while relevant in terms of background, are not used here since we examine meso-level social forces.

Notes on contributors

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