Psychology of Popular Media

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BRIEF REPORT

Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Relationships Between Young Student Women's Experiences of Everyday Sexual Harassment on Social Media and Self-Objectification, Body Shame, and Personal Safety Anxiety

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Sexual harassment is highly prevalent in online settings, including social media, and has negative consequences for young women's mental health. Understanding the psychological mechanisms underpinning these negative effects is important. Using an expanded objectification theory model as our theoretical framework (Calogero et al., 2021), we examine the relationship between sexual harassment on social media and young student women's body shame and personal safety anxiety, cross-sectionally and longitudinally including by examining self-objectification as a mediator. Data from 207 student women aged 18–25 years ($M = 21.06$, $SD = 1.89$) from the United Kingdom were collected at two time points 10 weeks apart. Cross-sectional analyses at Time 1 and Time 2 showed that sexual harassment on social media was indirectly associated with body shame and physical safety anxiety via self-objectification, with additional direct paths to body shame (Time 1 and Time 2) and physical safety anxiety (Time 2 only). Over 10 weeks, sexual harassment on social media was not indirectly associated with body shame or physical safety anxiety, via self-objectification at Time 1 or Time 2. These findings provide cross-sectional but not longitudinal support for an expanded objectification theory model in online contexts. Our findings have important methodological implications for research examining objectification processes over time that are discussed within.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
Sexual harassment on social media is a growing societal problem that disproportionately affects girls and women. Experiencing sexual harassment on social media was found to be associated with body shame and personal safety concerns among young student women. Interventions that seek to reduce sexual harassment on social media are needed.

Keywords: online sexual harassment, objectification theory, body image, personal safety anxiety, social media

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Kora Dollimore served as lead for conceptualization, methodology, project administration, and writing–original draft and served in a supporting role for formal analysis. Megan Hurst served as lead for data curation and formal analysis and contributed equally to writing–review and editing. Jennifer A. Cassarly served in a supporting role for conceptualization, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing. Beth T. Bell served as lead for writing–review and editing, contributed equally to conceptualization and methodology, and served in a supporting role for data curation, formal analysis, and project administration.

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Sexual harassment refers to a spectrum of unwanted sexual conduct perpetrated against individuals, usually women, including both everyday experiences (e.g., catcalling) and rarer—often criminal—acts (e.g., stalking; APPG for UN Women, 2021). Sexual harassment is highly prevalent in both offline and online settings (APPG for UN Women, 2021), including social media (Fox & Tang, 2017; Reed et al., 2020). Compared to its offline counterpart, sexual harassment on social media can overcome geographic barriers, be perpetrated anonymously, and is more difficult to regulate (Henry & Powell, 2018; Reed et al., 2020). The omnipresence of mobile technology means that women can experience this harassment anytime and anywhere. Research has begun to link online harassment to negative mental health outcomes (e.g., Copp et al., 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018), but the psychological mechanisms underpinning these effects have not been tested. In the present study, we use an expanded objectification theory model (Calogero et al., 2021) as our theoretical lens, to examine links between everyday sexual harassment on social media, and negative body image and personal safety anxiety, cross-sectionally and over time.

Expanded Objectification Theory

Objectification theory provides a structured account of how sexual harassment leads to negative outcomes over time (Calogero et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). According to this theory, when women encounter sexual harassment, they are reduced to sexual objects, valued for the sexual function of their bodies, not their personhood. Repeated experiences of sexual harassment socialize girls and women to self-objectify, altering their self-view through the internalization of an external viewer. Self-objectification manifests in both cognitive and behavioral ways, including overvaluation of one's own appearance and constant self-surveillance (Lindner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2017), which in turn, leads to negative psychological outcomes for women, including body image concerns and disordered eating behavior (Calogero et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2021).

More recently objectification theory has been expanded to explain how sexual harassment influences women's personal safety anxiety, that is, a chronic and diffuse sense of threat to one's own safety (Calogero et al., 2021). There is substantial cross-sectional data supporting expanded objectification theory as an explanation of how sexual harassment in offline settings contributes to negative mental health outcomes (Calogero et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2021) and personal safety anxiety (Calogero et al., 2021). However, longitudinal evidence supporting the predicted temporal antecedence of objectification variables is mixed; whereas some studies support predictions (Grabe et al., 2007; Petersen & Hyde, 2013), others do not (Kilpela et al., 2019; Slater & Tiggemann, 2012).

The Present Study

In the present study, we examine how sexual harassment on social media links to body shame and personal safety anxiety, cross-sectionally and over time, including self-objectification as a mediator as predicted by an expanded objectification theory model (Calogero et al., 2021). In cross-sectional models (H1: Time 1, H2: Time 2), we hypothesize significant indirect effects of sexual harassment on body shame (H1a, H2a) and physical safety anxiety (H1b, H2b). In the longitudinal model (Figure 1), we hypothesize that this model would hold at both time points when considered together (H3a), and that there would be an indirect effect of Time 1 sexual harassment on Time 2 body shame and Time 2 physical safety anxiety—via self-objectification at Time 2 (H3b, H3c) and Time 1 (H3d, H3e).[1]

Method

Participants

Young student women (age range = 18–25 years old) were recruited in two ways; the York St John University psychology participant pool ($n = 111$; age $M = 20.78$; $SD = 1.88$) and the prolific participant recruitment scheme ($n = 201$; age $M = 21.22$; $SD = 1.89$). This resulted in a sample of 312 participants at Time 1, 209 of whom also responded at Time 2. In terms of ethnicity, participants identified as White British (72%), Asian (9%), Mixed/Multiple (4.8%), Black (4.5%), Arab (1%), or Other (8%). In terms of sexuality, participants identified as heterosexual (73.2%), bisexual (17.2%), gay or lesbian (2.9%), other (3%), or unsure (2.5%), with 1% preferring not to say.

Measures

Sexual Harassment on Social Media

In the absence of preexisting measures of sexual harassment on social media, a new measure was developed and validated that sought to capture women's experiences of everyday harassment on social media, focusing on their experiences of unwanted sexual advances (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). The scale included eight items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) and demonstrated excellent internal reliability at Time 1 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .94$). Full details of the scale development process (including pilot testing and exploratory factor analysis) as well as the final eight-item scale can be found in the Open Science Framework (OSF; Dollimore et al., 2024).

Self-Objectification

The body surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) was used to assess self-objectification. Participants responded to eight items using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The OBC has good construct and discriminant validity when used with undergraduate women and good test–rest reliability (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). The scale had good internal reliability; Time 1 ($\alpha = .82$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .83$).

Body Shame

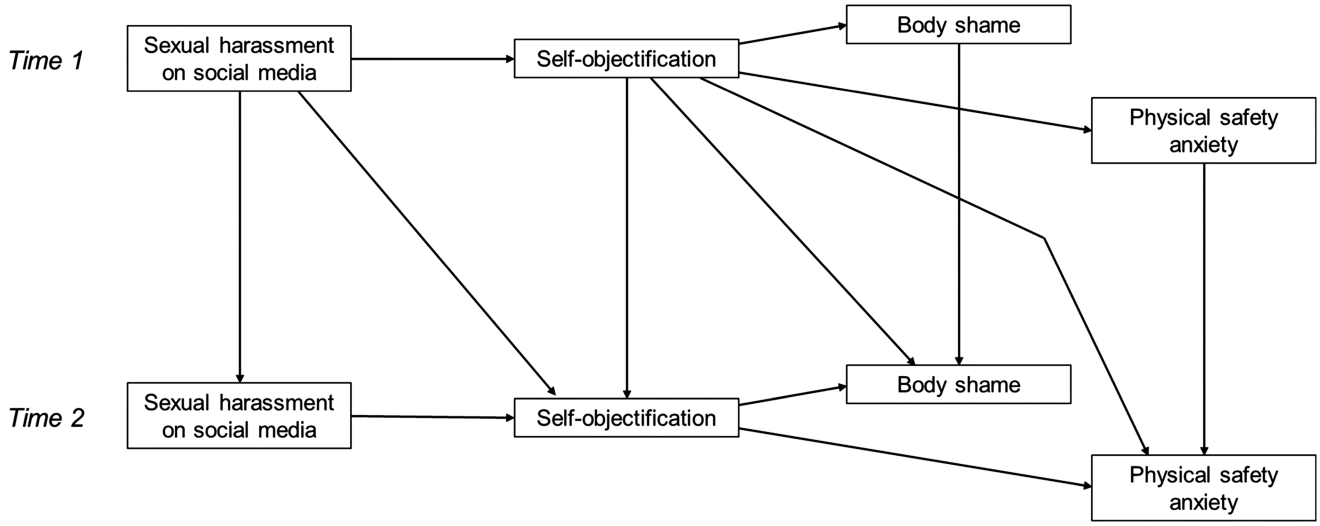
Body shame was measured using the eight-item body shame subscale taken from the OBCS (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Each item in this scale was also rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Internal reliability was very good at Time 1 ($\alpha = .85$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .86$).

Personal Safety Anxiety

Personal safety anxiety was measured using the Personal Safety Anxiety and Vigilance Scale (PSAVS; Calogero et al., 2021).

[1] Where initial model fit does not meet accepted thresholds, we intend to adjust models to achieve acceptably close fit that is theoretically plausible (Kline, 2015); these adjusted models represent exploratory analyses.

Figure 1
Theorized Longitudinal Model



Note. Covariances between physical safety anxiety and body shame are not depicted at Time 1 and Time 2 for clarity but are included in the model.

Eight items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*completely unlike me*) to 5 (*completely like me*). The PSAVS has demonstrated excellent reliability and validity among women (Calogero et al., 2021). Internal reliability was good at Time 1 ($\alpha = .80$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .78$).

Procedure

Ethics approval for the study was gained from York St John University. Participants were directed to the online survey on Qualtrics, where they were presented with an information sheet and provided consent. After completing the survey, participants were provided with details of relevant support organizations and were reminded of the second part of the study. Ten weeks later, participants received an automated email containing the second survey link. Once completed, they were again reminded of the support organizations available to them.

Data Analysis

All data, analysis scripts, materials, and preregistration details can be accessed on the OSF (Dollimore et al., 2024). The analyses were preregistered at AsPredicted, before Time 2 data collection (https://aspredicted.org/4dg23.pdf). Path models were constructed in the lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012). We used full information maximum likelihood estimation to deal with missing data (0.1% of items within any given analysis), with the variance of the independent variables estimated by the models. To account for nonnormality, we used bootstrapping (2,000 samples) and bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (CIs) to identify significant direct and indirect effects. Significance was interpreted from unstandardized coefficients and CIs.

Cross-Sectional Analyses

To assess cross-sectional relationships, we constructed two path models (T1 and T2). Constructs were modeled as observed variables using scale means. Sexual harassment was modeled to be directly associated with self-objectification, which in turn was modeled to be directly associated with body shame and physical safety anxiety; the residual variances of body shame and physical safety anxiety were covaried. A model without this covariance implies all associations between body shame and physical safety anxiety are due to shared antecedents in the model; this seemed implausible given other factors are known to influence both (e.g., offline sexual harassment; Calogero et al., 2021). The addition of this covariance represents a "bow-free" pattern of residuals, which can be regarded as recursive for matters of identification. Model fit was checked using traditional thresholds of acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In the event of unacceptable model fit, we examined local fit indices (e.g., standardized residuals, modification indices) to identify whether the direct paths between sexual harassment and outcome variables were required to represent the data. Such adjusted models were interpreted as exploratory analyses that require further validation (Kline, 2015). We assessed these pathways in the final model at each time point, even if that model was fully saturated (e.g., $df = 0$).

Longitudinal Analyses

We ran a path model that combined the cross-sectional models above with appropriate links over time (see Figure 1). Model fit was assessed as outlined above; unacceptable model fit indicated the model did not accurately represent relationships between variables over time. In such a case, we improved model fit by examining modification indices and adding in sequence those that were temporally plausible (e.g., T2 could not predict T1) and those that did not introduce feedback loops or bow patterns of residuals (Kline, 2015). Adjusted models were interpreted as exploratory. As per hypotheses, we examined cross-sectional elements of this model and indirect effects via self-objectification over time. Indirect pathways between T1 sexual harassment and T2 body shame and physical safety anxiety were examined. Specifically, we examined indirect pathway via T1

self-objectification (i.e., $SHSM_{T1} \rightarrow SO_{T1} \rightarrow BS_{T2}/PSA_{T2}$) and via T2 self-objectification (i.e., $SHSM_{T1} \rightarrow SO_{T2} \rightarrow BS_{T2}/PSA_{T2}$).

Results

Missing Data and Data Cleaning

No participants failed more than 50% of attention checks at each time point. For the longitudinal analysis, we excluded 107 participants whose responses could not be matched across time, leaving 207 participants. For each analysis (T1, T2, and longitudinal), these numbers exceed general guidance for sample size in path analysis (Kline, 2015; Weston & Gore, 2006). Across all data, 0.1% of data were missing at the item level, and Little's missing completely at random test indicated that data were missing completely at random, $\chi^2(1,013) = 1{,}002.62$, $p = .59$. At the scale level, one value was missing at T1, with none missing at T2 or in the longitudinal subset.

Cross-Sectional Analyses

Time 1

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all analyses are available on the OSF (Dollimore et al., 2024). The initial T1 model had poor model fit ($\chi^2 = 15.10$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$; comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.92, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.15, 90% CI [0.08, 0.22], standardized root-mean-square residual [SRMR] = 0.05), indicating relationships between sexual harassment and body shame and/or physical safety anxiety were not solely due to self-objectification. Adding a direct path from sexual harassment to body shame led to acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 2.30$, $df = 1$, $p = .13$; CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.06, 90% CI [0.00, 0.18], SRMR = 0.02).[2] In this adjusted model, sexual harassment was directly and positively associated with self-objectification ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.21]; $\beta = .20$) and body shame ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.24]; $\beta = .17$). These effects were small. Self-objectification was directly and positively associated with body shame ($b = 0.71$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.59, 0.83]; $\beta = .55$) and physical safety anxiety ($b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.45]; $\beta = .18$); these effects were large and small, respectively. The covariance between the error terms of body shame and physical safety anxiety was nonsignificant ($b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.08, 0.06]; $\beta = -.02$). The indirect association between sexual harassment and body shame, via self-objectification, was positive and significant ($b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.15]; $\beta = .11$). The indirect association between sexual harassment and physical safety anxiety, via self-objectification, was also positive and significant ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]; $\beta = .04$). Both effects were small.

Time 2

The initial T2 model had a poor model fit ($\chi^2 = 7.72$, $df = 2$, $p = .02$; CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.12, 90% CI [0.04, 0.21], SRMR = 0.04), indicating relationships between sexual harassment and body shame and physical safety anxiety were not solely due to self-objectification. Adding the direct path from sexual harassment to body shame improved model fit (Modification Index = 3.99); however, RMSEA remained poor (0.11, 95% CI [0.00, 0.25]). We added a direct path from sexual harassment to physical safety anxiety, resulting in a fully saturated model. In this adjusted model, sexual harassment was directly and positively associated with self-objectification ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.25]; $\beta = .24$), body shame ($b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.20]; $\beta = .11$), and physical safety anxiety ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.26]; $\beta = .13$); these effects were medium, small, and small in size. Self-objectification was directly and positively associated with body shame ($b = 0.76$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.62, 0.89]; $\beta = .58$), but not physical safety anxiety ($b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.01, 0.37]; $\beta = .13$); the significant effect was large. The covariance between the error terms of body shame and physical safety anxiety was nonsignificant ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.05]; $\beta = -.05$). The indirect association between sexual harassment and body shame, via self-objectification, was positive and significant ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.20]; $\beta = .14$). The indirect association between sexual harassment and physical safety anxiety, via self-objectification, was also positive and significant, although smaller ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.08]; $\beta = .03$). Both effects were small.

Longitudinal Analysis

The initial model had a poor model fit ($\chi^2 = 27.84$, $df = 10$, $p = .002$; CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.09, 90% CI [0.05, 0.14], SRMR = 0.04). On examining the modification indices, the pathway between T1 body shame and T2 self-objectification was added to improve model fit (Modification Index = 10.72), resulting in acceptable fit indices ($\chi^2 = 16.79$, $df = 9$, $p = .05$; CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07, 90% CI [0.00, 0.11], SRMR = 0.03; Figure 2; also see OSF (Dollimore et al., 2024). The T1 pathways remained significant in this model, including the added direct path from sexual harassment to body shame. However, among T2 variables, the only significant path was between self-objectification and body shame, which was medium in size. All T2 variables were significantly predicted by their T1 counterparts, and these autoregressive paths were large; for T2 physical safety anxiety and sexual harassment, these were the only significant predictors. T2 self-objectification was predicted by T1 self-objectification and body shame (a small effect), but not predicted by T1 or T2 sexual harassment. T2 body shame was predicted by T1 body shame and T2 self-objectification (a medium effect), but not T1 self-objectification or T2 sexual harassment. Given these nonsignificant paths between T1 and T2 variables, all four indirect pathways from T1 sexual harassment to the T2 outcome variables (via self-objectification at T1 or T2) were nonsignificant.

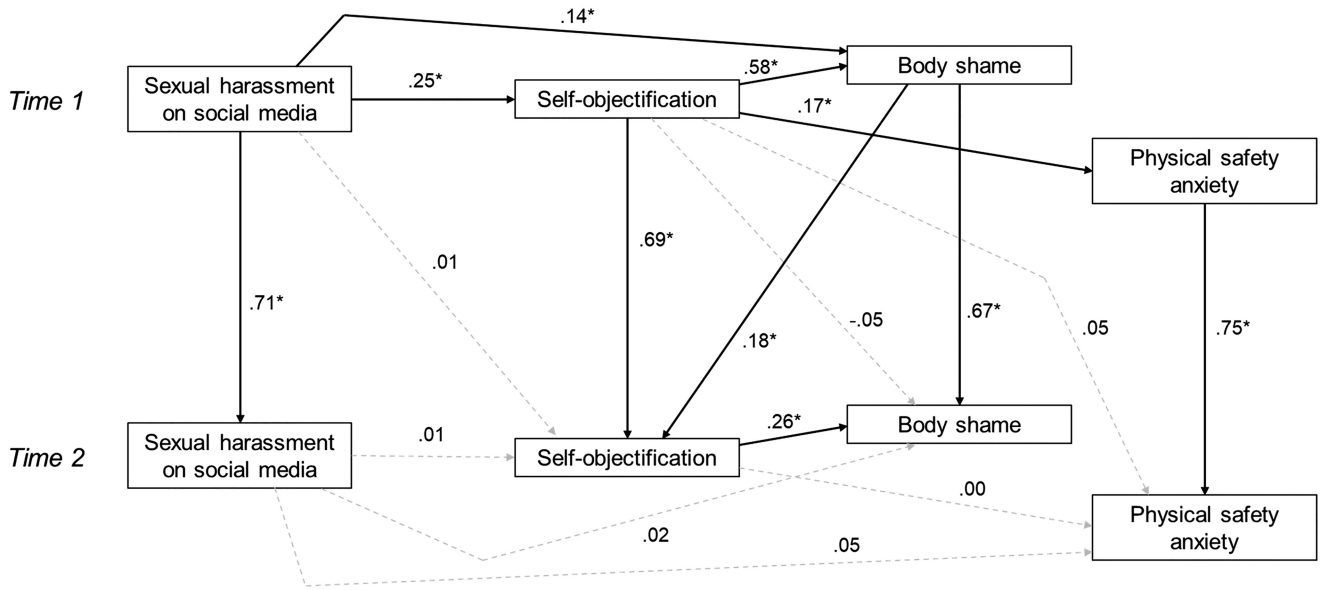
Discussion

The present study examined how sexual harassment on social media relates to women's body shame and personal safety anxiety. In cross-sectional analyses, our models which proposed only indirect links between sexual harassment on social media and body shame and physical safety anxiety were not supported by the data; adjusted exploratory models suggested there were also direct links

[2] We note the upper bound confidence interval for RMSEA is above ideal levels. However, models with low *df* are often incorrectly rejected due to high RMSEA and these can be considered holistically alongside other fit indices in these cases (e.g., a nonsignificant chi-square, high CFI and low SRMR; Kenny et al., 2015).

Figure 2

Longitudinal Path Model Representing Relationships Between Sexual Harassment on Social Media, Self-Objectification, and Outcome Variables



Note. Standardized estimates are shown. Dashed gray lines represent nonsignificant paths that are estimated in the model. Covariances between physical safety anxiety and body shame are not depicted at Time 1 and Time 2 for clarity but are included in the model.
* $p < .05$.

between sexual harassment on social media and these outcomes. In the adjusted models, there were indirect effects of sexual harassment on social media on both body shame and physical safety anxiety, via self-objectification. By showing that sexual harassment on social media is directly and indirectly associated with body shame, and directly associated with personal safety anxiety, we contribute to growing research linking sexual harassment on social media to poor mental health outcomes (e.g., Copp et al., 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2018). We also provide some cross-sectional support for an expanded objectification theory model (Calogero et al., 2021) as an explanation of how online harassment contributes to negative outcomes among women.

However, none of our longitudinal hypotheses were supported; Time 1 sexual harassment was not associated with changes in self-objectification, body shame, and personal safety anxiety 10 weeks later. Instead, Time 1 body shame was associated with Time 1 self-objectification. One interpretation is that links between sexual harassment and psychological variables may be more complex and reciprocal than linear tests of objectification theory allow. Alternatively, it may be the 10-week gap between data collection was too short to capture objectification processes as they unfold over time. Our model variables were highly stable over the study period; the autoregressive pathways were considerable ($\beta = .67$ or higher). Past studies providing empirical support for objectification theory over time have typically used longer time frames (e.g., 2–4 years; Grabe et al., 2007; Petersen & Hyde, 2013). At present, issues related to the timing, direction, and reciprocity of objectification processes are not well understood. Developing a stronger methodological framework for testing these relationships is crucial as we move away from cross-sectional research toward methods that can demonstrate temporal antecedence.

Limitations

Though our sample size is sufficient to avoid technical issues in path model estimations (e.g., Kline, 2015), it may still be insufficiently powered to detect small effects, which are common in longitudinal models with large autoregressive paths (Adachi & Willoughby, 2015). The sample also lacked diversity; participants were mostly White (72%) and other demographic characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status) were not assessed. Given that sexual harassment is more common among marginalized groups (Espelage et al., 2016), future research should engage more diverse samples. Furthermore, there are limitations to the measures used. First, our sexual harassment measure did not encompass all forms of harassment. Instead, it focused on everyday experiences of unwanted sexual attention (Fitzgerald et al., 1995) and excluded other types of harassment (e.g., gender-based harassment; Fitzgerald et al., 1995), as well as more criminal activity (e.g., revenge porn). These experiences likely have important implications for well-being, and future research should explore this. Second, the measure of personal safety anxiety (Calogero et al., 2021) focuses on how women's safety concerns manifest offline. Yet online harassment may affect personal safety anxiety online too (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2017) and future research should develop means of assessing this.

Conclusion

This study is the first to examine how sexual harassment on social media links to body shame and personal safety anxiety cross-sectionally and longitudinally. The findings support a possible role of sexual harassment on social media in body shame and personal safety anxiety cross-sectionally, via self-objectification. However, these relationships were not supported over a 10-week time period.

Future research should further examine the timeframe over which the objectification process unfolds, as well as the impact of more extreme forms of online harassment on well-being.

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