

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sexualize one, objectify all? The sexualization spillover effect on female job candidates

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Email: laura.guillen@esade.edu**Summary**

We examined whether sexualizing a businesswoman impacts attitudes toward subsequently evaluated, nonsexualized females applying for a corporate managerial position. Research shows that sexualized women are perceived as less warm and competent (i.e., objectified). Integrating this work with research on social cognition, we hypothesized that the negative effect of sexualization “spills over” onto other nonsexualized women, reducing their hireability. Across two experiments, initially sexualized women were perceived as less warm and competent, as were subsequently evaluated nonsexualized female job candidates. In turn, these negative perceptions reduced the applicants' probability of being hired. Sexualization of women also increased intentions to hire a subsequently evaluated male candidate. The results were robust when we controlled for evaluators' gender and age. Our findings demonstrate that female job applicants can experience detrimental effects from sexually based objectification, even when they are not the individuals initially sexualized. We discuss implications for women's careers.

KEYWORDS

competence, gender, hiring, sexual objectification, sexualization, warmth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity is still prevalent in organizations, with women holding only 31% of managerial positions globally (Catalyst, 2022). Studies confirm a female disadvantage in job and career outcomes (Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 1992; Hangartner et al., 2021; Heilman et al., 2004; Koch et al., 2015; Kübler et al., 2018), such as callbacks for interviews (Ayres, 2003; Neumark et al., 1996; see also Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), hiring, professional evaluations, promotions, and pay (Babcock et al., 2017; Biernat & Vescio, 2002; Blau & Kahn, 2017; Davison & Burke, 2000; Fiske et al., 1991; Hardy et al., 2022; Jagsi et al., 2012; Koch et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2012). Men and women are judged differently in work settings (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and inaccurate judgments lead to biased

personnel decisions and discriminatory behaviors that affect women's professional success (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Perry et al., 1994). In this paper, we focus on biases in hiring, because being selected or rejected for a job has profound consequences for individuals' personal and professional lives (e.g., Hardy et al., 2022).

Although most research on biases compares male and female candidates, scholars have highlighted that not all women are judged similarly, because people have multi-faceted identities that can simultaneously influence judgments. Certain gender subcategories (e.g., being older, Latina, or overweight) can magnify biases against women (e.g., Pingitore et al., 1994; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). “Sexy” women seem to be judged particularly harshly and provoke negative evaluations (Castaño et al., 2019; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016; Heflick et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2018), such as perceptions that they are less

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leader-like (agentic) (Cuadrado et al., 2021; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick et al., 2005; Howlett et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018; Wookey et al., 2009). Sexualization (focus on the sexual appeal or sexual appearance of a person, whose value is based on their sexiness [Gray et al., 2011]) permeates Western cultures (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007) and can contribute to discrimination against female job candidates. Yet the role that sexualization plays in the work context has been neglected in past academic research (for an exception, see Forsythe et al., 1985).

There is an ongoing debate about whether sexualization inevitably harms women. On the one hand, the idea that sexualization can play to women's advantage is ingrained in Western materialistic cultures (Anderson, 2014; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). For example, public figures like Donald Trump have encouraged women to take advantage of their "God-given assets" (Kray & Locke, 2008) or to engage in "strategic flirting" (Smith et al., 2013). Catherine Hakim, Professor at the London School of Economics, encourages professional women to use their "erotic capital"—beauty, sex appeal, and dress sense—to get ahead in a male-dominated world (Hakim, 2011). But other scholars have warned that self-sexualizing women—those who dress in sexually suggestive ways (Infanger et al., 2016)—are devalued and suffer social penalties (e.g., Cahoon & Edmonds, 1989; Glick et al., 2005; Infanger et al., 2016; Rudman, 1998).

Indeed, experimental studies so far have led to a robust conclusion: Self-sexualizing women are objectified (i.e., seen as "objects"; De Wilde et al., 2021) and perceived as lacking *competence* and *warmth* (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Heflick et al., 2011; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Studies involving thousands of people from varied cultures have shown that interpersonal judgments are made on these two fundamental dimensions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008) and that perceptions of competence and warmth have an extraordinary importance for guiding decisions in the workplace, including hiring decisions (e.g., Agerström et al., 2012; Casciaro & Lobo, 2008; Cuddy et al., 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Sexualized women, who are seen as incompetent and cold, may not be granted access to high-status jobs (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2011).

In this study, we focus on the consequences that self-sexualization has for women in the workplace even when they are explicitly described as highly skilled and efficacious in their jobs, when the sexualization is subtle (moderately revealing business attire), and regardless of evaluators' gender. Going a step further, we specifically propose that sexualization of a businesswoman can have an impact on another subsequently evaluated, female job candidate: the *sexualization spillover effect*. That is, sexualization is detrimental to other women, even when these women are not related to the self-sexualizing woman and dress in non-sexy ways. Aligned with this logic, a task force report by the APA (2007) stated that mere exposure to female sexualization can affect perceptions of other (nonsexualized) women at work.

So far, however, only a few studies have documented how such exposure influences people's responses to women in subsequent interactions (e.g., Gan et al., 1997; Hansen & Hansen, 1988; Jansma

et al., 1997; McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990; Mulac et al., 2002). The findings of these studies are provocative. For example, men who viewed sexually explicit films ignored their female partners' intellectual contributions and displayed more dominant (Mulac et al., 2002) and sexist (McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990) behavior toward another woman, compared with men in the control group. Rudman and Borgida (1995) found that men exposed to sexist commercials were more likely to later rate a female research confederate posing as a job applicant as less competent and intelligent. While providing important insights, this line of research mixed sexualization with sexism, using sexualized images of women alongside degrading content such as sexist language toward women and/or pornography, and sampled only male participants. It thus remains unclear (a) whether these spillover effects exist when sexualization is more subtle (revealing business attire rather than pornographic material), (b) what psychological mechanism explains them, and (c) what consequences they entail for nonsexualized women in work settings (targets of the spillover effect).

Our paper fills these gaps and explores the consequences of sexualization in the work context for another woman in a subsequent work event (in our case, a hiring decision). Figure 1 depicts our theoretical model, which we test in two studies with experimental data sampling both male and female participants and controlling for their age and gender.

By integrating research on social judgments in the workplace (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2011; Strinić et al., 2021), sexual objectification (Heflick et al., 2011; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), and social cognition (e.g., Chaiken, 1987; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Higgins & Bargh, 1987), we find support for a spillover effect of sexualization and contribute to the literature on bias against women at work in three important ways. First, we introduce objectification theory into the organizational behavior research: We show that self-sexualization, even when it is relatively subtle, disadvantages women in the workplace by leading others (both men and other women) to objectify them (i.e., to see them as low in competence and warmth). Second, we are the first to show that this disadvantage spills over onto other subsequently encountered women in the workplace who are not dressed in sexually suggestive ways. Third, we document the effects of these perceptions on hiring decisions—an important bias that women may suffer in the workplace.

2 | OPERATIONALIZATIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

We distinguish between sexualization (viewing a person in a sexual manner) and objectification (seeing a person as an object or less human [Heflick et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010; Nussbaum, 1999]). Objectification can occur in the absence of sexualization (as with workers; Andrighetto et al., 2017) and is not an inevitable consequence of sexualization (Fasoli et al., 2018). This distinction is important because, as other scholars have noted (Heldman & Wade, 2011; Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014), research in this area needs to avoid the

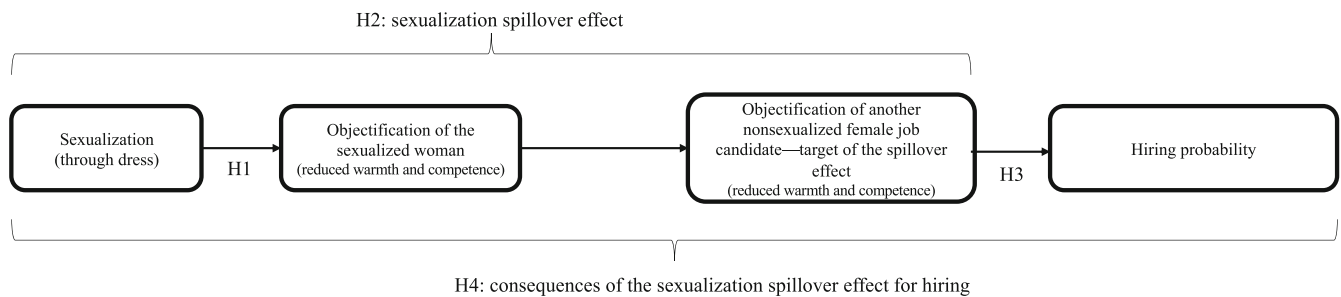


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model.

pitfalls of treating objectification as both a process (or antecedent) and an outcome.

To address this issue, we examine sexualization by manipulating the portrayal of female targets through dress (e.g., Barlett et al., 2008). Past studies have primed sexualization through advertising videos or pictures that display sexually suggestive images of women (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010; Rudman & Borgida, 1995). For example, they used models showing off their body and skin—portrayed in bikinis, underwear, or revealing clothing (e.g., Goldenberg et al., 2011; Gurung & Chrouser, 2007). By contrast, we prime sexualization in relatively inexplicit ways (i.e., with pictures of women in moderately revealing business attire vs. non-revealing business attire), to mirror experiences men and women are exposed to in their daily work lives. Sexualization can lead to seeing a person as a sexual object (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Langton, 2009; see also APA, 2007)—that is, to sexual objectification—by which women are less likely judged as possessing human attributes and internal mental states, such as intelligence or friendliness (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Loughnan et al., 2010; Vaes et al., 2011).

Past research has identified competence and warmth as two primary dimensions of human judgment (Fiske et al., 2002; Harris & Fiske, 2006). While recognizing that other entities can be attributed warmth and competence (e.g., organizations; Aaker et al., 2010) and that other dimensions of human judgment exist (Haslam, 2006; Leyens, 2009), sexual objectification research has measured objectification as the reduced belief that a person has these essentially human characteristics (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Heflick et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010). Warmth indicates the extent to which others are perceived to have good intentions and be friendly and trustworthy. In contrast, competence refers to the perceived ability to act upon intentions. Studies using neuroimages provide support for this operationalization. In one series of studies, participants were shown images of people who were stereotyped as high or low in warmth and competence, alongside images of everyday objects (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Images of people low in both characteristics activated the medial prefrontal cortex much less than images of people believed to be high in either or both and much more similarly to the images of everyday objects. This area of the brain is necessary for social cognition, including empathy and the recognition of human voices (Grossmann, 2013; Lieberman et al., 2019; van Overwalle, 2009). Sexualized female bodies are recognized analytically (like objects), whereas nonsexualized

images elicit configural processing (Bernard et al., 2015). Similarly, research by Cikara et al. (2011) found that sexualized images of women reduce men's brain activity associated with mental-state attribution (a response related to seeing an entity as human). Specifically, in work settings, sexualization leads to a competence penalty and a warmth deficit (e.g., Infanger et al., 2016; Rudman et al., 2012), which affects hiring and promotability in high-status jobs (Glick et al., 2005; Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 1999).

Leach et al. (2007) have suggested that warmth can be defined by morality and sociability. Morality refers to being benevolent to others in ways that facilitate principled relationships (e.g., being honest, trustworthy, and sincere), and sociability refers to positive affect in relations (e.g., being friendly, helpful, and warm) (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). We have included both in our measure of warmth, in line with past research on the objectification of women (Heflick et al., 2011).

3 | THE SEXUALIZATION SPILLOVER EFFECT

3.1 | Objectifying the sexualized woman

The conclusion in the sexualization literature is clear: When individuals focus on women's physical bodies, they perceive these women as “objects.” That is, sexualizing women activates a *women-as-objects* heuristic (Morris et al., 2018) that leads to denying these women qualities that would define them as human (cf. Harris & Fiske, 2006; Haslam, 2006; Heflick et al., 2011; Vaes et al., 2011). These include warmth and competence (Heflick et al., 2011; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), as well as broad attributions of mental and emotional states (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010) such as “lacking mind” (Gray et al., 2011; Haslam et al., 2005). Accordingly, we expect that sexualized businesswomen will be seen as less competent and less warm than women wearing non-revealing clothing (Daniels & Zurbruggen, 2016; Infanger et al., 2016).

To date, research has mostly explored perceptions of sexualized women whose skillfulness was not specified. Yet gender biases manifest even when women are successful in corporate life (Lyness & Judiesch, 1999), and evaluators discredit their work accomplishments despite explicit information about their high performance (Heilman

et al., 2004). That is, priming candidates' merits does not suffice to eliminate evaluators' bias (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). In addition, although some studies on objectifying sexualized targets have focused on male respondents only (e.g., Cikara et al., 2011; Rudman & Borgida, 1995), research has shown that women also objectify women in these conditions (Heflick et al., 2011; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Loughnan et al., 2010; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Such negative judgments by women may be due to a sense of competition (Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011). We explore whether sexualization harms perceptions of warmth and competence in the work context, even when the sexualized woman is explicitly described as highly skilled and efficacious in her job, when sexualization is subtle (revealing business attire), and regardless of evaluators' gender. Thus,

Hypothesis 1. Sexualizing a businesswoman leads to objectifying her (reduces perceptions of her competence and warmth), regardless of evaluators' gender.

3.2 | Objectifying another nonsexualized woman

Drawing from social cognition literature, we hypothesize that sexualizing a businesswoman affects not only how this woman is perceived but also how *other* women at work—even entirely unrelated and nonsexualized ones—are perceived. This happens, we propose, because of subordinate, or at least separate, categorization that drives social perception processes (Hamilton & Mackie, 1990). That is, when individuals are exposed to a sexualized woman, they do not necessarily classify her into the broad category “female” (Eagly & Karau, 2002), but rather into the more specific subcategory “female sexual objects” (cf. Brewer et al., 1981; Deaux et al., 1985; Devine & Baker, 1991).

Although there seem to be various processes in place to guide social perceptions (e.g., Andersen & Glassman, 1996; Smith & Zarate, 1992), the mental representation formed from a particular individual can be activated and used when a new individual is encountered (e.g., Smith & Zarate, 1992). Research on construct accessibility (Higgins & Bargh, 1987) suggests that a situation that implicitly primes people to categorize a woman negatively (as a sexual object) enhances accessibility of this harmful female subcategory, which has consequences for a newly encountered woman. These evaluations are accessible due to *recency*—temporary accessibility whereby contextual influences induce perceivers to interpret events consistent with momentarily activated constructs (see, e.g., Glick et al., 2005; Rudman & Borgida, 1995)—the assumption here is that there are implicit memory effects that impact social judgments (e.g., Smith & Branscombe, 1988). Evaluative conditioning, which affects attitudes toward people (see, e.g., Hughes et al., 2019), occurs when a valenced stimulus is presented in close conjunction to a neutral stimulus. In our case, the (negatively) valenced stimulus is a sexualized businesswoman, while the neutral stimulus is another woman to be judged; the result may be a negatively conditioned judgment. In short, the perceiver creates a cognitive representation of the sexualized woman

that is typical of the women-as-objects subcategory, independent of the perceiver's conscious awareness of the effect (Smith & Zarate, 1992), and this representation may remain cognitively accessible and influence how individuals judge another woman in a future event.

In addition, a businesswoman dressed in sexually suggestive ways tends to evoke relatively strong reactions (e.g., Glick et al., 2005), and salient and emotional responses have shown to be cognitively accessible to guide perceptions in subsequent social encounters (Andersen et al., 1990; Higgins & King, 1981). Thus, when people are to evaluate another woman at work, they will place her in the same “object” category. Construct accessibility also depends on similarity between stimuli. People “fill in” unobserved attributes of a person based on a similar, previously encountered one (e.g., Hintzman, 1986). In our case, gender may be salient when judging a sexualized woman, and thus, sexualization would influence a newly encountered woman (but not a man).

Several streams of research support this view. For example, in psychodynamics, the notion of *transference* occurs when a mental structure developed in a previous relationship automatically guides people's reactions toward another similar individual (e.g., Andersen & Cole, 1990). Research on stigma by association (e.g., Pryor et al., 2012) has shown that negative perceptions of one person can spill over onto a new target with similar attributes (e.g., gender). In work contexts, leadership scholars (Ritter & Lord, 2007) have shown that when a new leader is similar to one an individual has experience with, there is an attribution of the past leader's characteristics to the new leader.

In sum, when people are exposed to sexualization, the women-as-objects category is cognitively activated, reducing perceptions of the sexualized woman's warmth and competence, that is, sexually objectifying her. These perceptions will stay active in the mind and will be applied to a new, unrelated female job applicant. Accordingly, we expect that both sexualized women and those subsequently evaluated will be objectified (perceived as having less warmth and competence), regardless of evaluators' gender. To date, however, no research has tested any form of a sexualization spillover effect with female observers/participants. Thus,

Hypothesis 2. Sexualizing a businesswoman leads to objectifying her and in turn to objectifying a nonsexualized female job candidate—that is, sexualization has a spillover effect.

4 | THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE SPILLOVER EFFECT FOR HIRING DECISIONS

The rich research on competence and warmth (e.g., Wojciszke & Abele, 2008) proposes that judgments on these dimensions trigger behavioral consequences (e.g., active attack and opposition) that affect professional outcomes (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002). In line with this logic, we expect that perceived lack of

competence and warmth following sexualization will influence hiring decisions.

Who gets hired may depend on the match between the candidate's personal attributes and the stereotypical expectations associated with a job (Lord et al., 2020). Managerial roles are largely viewed as requiring both agentic attributes (akin to competence) and communal ones (akin to warmth) (Cuddy et al., 2011; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Heilman et al., 1989). Agency is critical for leadership (e.g., House et al., 1991) and for male-typed jobs (Crawford, 2005), and those who appear agentic end up being the most influential players in organizations, independently of the actual depth of their knowledge (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Communion helps people emerge and persist as leaders (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Srivastava et al., 2006), relates to maintaining positive work relationships (e.g., Harris et al., 2007), and enhances people's willingness to work with an employee (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008). In sum, when individuals are perceived as highly competent and warm, they are seen as leader-like and capable of succeeding in managerial roles (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004), making them hireable (e.g., Agerström et al., 2012; Eaton et al., 2020; Fetscherin et al., 2020; Krings et al., 2011; Martinez et al., 2016; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Strinić et al., 2022; Varghese et al., 2018).

The other side of the coin is that those seen as having little competence and social skill have lower chances of getting hired. People with low warmth and competence elicit contempt (Fiske et al., 2002) and dislike (Heflick et al., 2011) and, in consequence, low career rewards such as poor hireability appraisals (Glick et al., 2005; Heilman, 2001; Varghese et al., 2018). The negative effect of sexualization on perceived competence and warmth can often make women seem unqualified for management positions (see Eagly & Karau, 2002) even when their CVs show them as experienced and effective in their past job positions (Eagly et al., 1992; Heilman et al., 2004). In work settings, perceptions of warmth and competence have shown to affect hiring and promotability in high-status jobs (Glick et al., 2005; Heilman, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Therefore, we expect:

Hypothesis 3. Perceptions of the competence and warmth of a female job candidate who is a target of the spillover effect are positively related to her hireability.

All in all, we propose a sequential mediation model in which (a) sexualizing a businesswoman reduces perceptions of her competence and warmth and (b) these reduced perceptions harm how competent and warm another unrelated, nonsexualized female job candidate is perceived to be, (c) thereby decreasing that candidate's probability of getting hired (see Figure 1):

Hypothesis 4. The relationship between sexualizing a businesswoman and hiring a nonsexualized female job candidate is sequentially mediated by perceptions of the competence and warmth of the sexualized woman and of the female job candidate (target of the spillover effect).

5 | EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

We conducted a pilot study to explore the effectiveness of the sexualization manipulation through dress and the sexualization spillover effect on two job candidates, female and male, whose competence was unspecified. Then, in Study 1, we assessed our entire model and tested whether inducing objectification via sexualization of a businesswoman spills over and reduces perceptions of the competence and warmth of an unrelated nonsexualized female job candidate—that is, the sexualization spillover effect, described as highly skilled and efficacious in her job. We measured the hiring probability of the female candidate to explore Hypotheses 3 and 4. We also asked participants to evaluate a male job candidate to test a potential halo effect, whereby an evaluator exposed to sexualized materials would subsequently negatively judge all candidates (regardless of gender), although we did not expect this effect. Study 2 complemented these findings with an executive sample and tested whether the same effects prevailed when the sexualized woman was not a fictional businesswoman but rather a well-known female influencer in the real world, explicitly described as a competent businesswoman with numerous followers on social media. In Studies 1 and 2, the initial sexualized woman and the woman target of the objectification spillover effect (the job candidate) were both presented in business scenarios. Our design thus addresses recent calls for replication in organizational psychology. In Study 2, as we did not find support for negative consequences of sexualization for male candidates, we focus on evaluations of a female candidate only. This is consistent both with our theorizing and with previous studies showing that the consequences of sexualization are stronger for women than for men and that sexualized men are not objectified (e.g., Bernard et al., 2012; Heflick et al., 2011; Vaes et al., 2011).

5.1 | Pilot study

5.1.1 | Method

Participants

We recruited 211 US-based employees using an online panel (TurkPrime). Participants were on average 39.94 years old ($SD = 10.66$), 46.45% were female, and 45.02% held at least a managerial position.

Procedure and materials

In the first part of the survey, we manipulated sexualization through dress (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010). We used sexualized versus nonsexualized pictures of three different Caucasian women, with a fairly average body size and a typical photographed face size. Participants were randomly assigned to the sexualization condition (attire of initial woman: sexualized and not sexualized). We asked participants to look at the picture of Alex, a product manager at a multinational company. We told them that research indicates that people make leadership decisions on limited information

and asked them to rate the extent to which they would be willing to work for Alex as their boss. In the second part of the survey, we provided pictures of two job candidates, female and male, without giving any additional background information (half of our participants saw the female candidate first and the other half the male candidate first). Participants were asked to rely on their first impressions and rate the extent to which they would hire the persons pictured as leaders in their organizations, ranging from 1 = *very unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*.

Control variables. We controlled for participants' gender (0 = male; 1 = female), age, and the attractiveness of the sexualized target with the item: "In your view, to what extent is Alex (the woman you were asked to review) physically attractive?" on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

Manipulation check. At the end of the survey, we asked participants to recall the picture of the sexualized woman (Alex) and rate the extent to which it was sexually suggestive (from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*).

5.1.2 | Results

Manipulation check

An ANOVA on perceived sexual suggestiveness revealed that the manipulation worked as expected ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.94$ vs. $M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.57$ for participants in the sexualized vs. nonsexualized conditions, respectively; $F(1, 210) = 119.08$, $p < .001$).

To decide which sexualized/nonsexualized pair of pictures to use in our subsequent studies, we ran ANOVAs and tested whether the pair of pictures affected our manipulation check or the perceived attractiveness of the sexualized women. While attractiveness did not differ across the three women ($p = .23$), the first one elicited stronger ratings of sexual suggestiveness ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.30$ in Pair 1, $M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.96$ in Pair 2, and $M = 3.38$, $SD = 2.24$ in Pair 3, and the difference was significant, $p < .001$). We therefore used this pair of pictures in our next study.

Sexualization spillover effect and hiring

Next, we tested the effect of the sexualization manipulation on the likelihood of hiring other nonsexualized female job candidates. We conducted Poisson regression analyses with the sexualization condition as a predictor of the other nonsexualized woman's likelihood of being hired as a leader; we entered our control variables as covariates and used robust standard errors. Results showed that sexualization was negatively and significantly related to hiring a female job candidate ($b = -.08$, robust $SE = .03$, $p = .019$). This provides initial support to our logic.

Robustness checks

We tested our argument that the sexualization spillover effect harms other women but not male job candidates. The results showed that

sexualizing Alex was not related to hiring a male candidate ($b = -.02$, robust $SE = .04$, $p = .96$).

In sum, our pilot study showed that the sexualization manipulation through dress was effective and provided initial evidence of a sexualization spillover effect. Next, we tested our entire model, using the picture that our respondents considered most sexually suggestive. For a more conservative test, we included more information about the competence of the job candidates (in the CV and additional performance appraisal information). And to address the potential confounding effects of attractiveness, we eliminated the picture of the target of the spillover effect. Studies have shown that the exact same CV is evaluated differently when it contains a female (vs. a male) job candidate name in it and that female candidates are considered less worthy of hiring than male ones (Steinpreis et al., 1999).

5.2 | Study 1

5.2.1 | Method

Participants

We recruited 348 US-based employees using an online panel (TurkPrime). Participants were on average 40.23 years old ($SD = 11.31$), 46.55% were female, 75.86% had at least a college degree, and 54.31% held at least a managerial position.

Procedure and materials

Sexualization has been manipulated in previous studies either through dress (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010) or by making people focus on a woman's appearance versus performance (e.g., Heflick et al., 2011). In this study, we used both manipulations, expecting both to yield similar results. Participants were randomly assigned to groups in a 2 (attire of initial woman: sexualized and control) \times 2 (focus: appearance and performance) between-subjects experimental design involving a mock hiring scenario. In the first task, we adapted materials developed by Heilman et al. (2004) and presented participants with a fictional business case about a female manager ("Linda") who was being considered for promotion to head of marketing and sales in a multinational company. Participants received background information about the company and the manager. Linda was described as having recently undergone a performance appraisal and consistently meeting her job-related targets. Qualitative feedback supposedly gathered by the HR department included three strengths (e.g., "significant progress in developing a new product tailored to clients' needs") and three areas needing development (e.g., "developing informal relationships with clients"). We included the pilot-tested picture of Linda (either sexualized or nonsexualized). Following Heflick et al. (2011), after participants reviewed this material, we asked them to focus on her appearance or, alternatively, her performance/merits and rate her competence and warmth, as well as her hireability. This design allowed us to induce objectification in a way similar to that used in previous studies in the literature, ensuring comparability of our results. We expected to find the strongest negative effects of

sexualization on perceptions of warmth and competence in participants primed with both objectification-inducing manipulations (sexualized picture and appearance-focused condition) and the weakest effects in participants not sexually primed at all (nonsexualized picture and performance-focused condition). We did not develop specific hypotheses about which manipulation (sexualization through dress or appearance focus) would be stronger.

In the second part of the survey, in a supposedly unrelated task, we asked participants to take the role of an HR manager and evaluate a female job candidate, “Emily Miller,” for a leadership position. In both our studies, participants went directly from one task to the next and we did not include a picture of Emily. Emily was described as speaking three languages fluently and having a university degree in economics with honors, an MBA in marketing, and 5 years of work experience as a consultant. Her last performance appraisal by her current employer included observations such as “completed a course in sales and negotiation” and “excellence-oriented, dynamic, ... [and] hard-working.” Participants were told that she met her targets and exceeded performance expectations during the last 12 months in her current job. After reviewing the information, participants rated Emily on warmth and competence¹ and indicated whether they would hire her; these ratings were modeled as our final dependent variables.

The final part of the survey was included to test whether the effects of sexualization might spill over onto male targets, an effect that we did not predict (males are not as close in social categorization to a sexualized woman as women are, so stigma by association should not occur). Participants reviewed a male job candidate, whose CV was comparable to Emily's and whom we also described as having performed successfully in the past. They next rated the likelihood they would hire him, which we used as a dependent variable in order to check the robustness of our results.

Sexualization. We first manipulated *sexualization* through Linda's attire. We used the pilot-tested pictures of the upper body of the *same* Caucasian woman, with a fairly average body size and a typical photographed face size. In the sexualized condition, Linda wore feminine business attire with a cleavage-enhancing shirt. In the control condition, she wore business, non-sexually suggestive attire. We randomly assigned participants to the sexualized (1) or the nonsexualized (0) condition.

We next randomly assigned participants to the appearance (1) or the performance (0) focus condition (Heflick et al., 2011). After reviewing Linda's background information and picture, participants in the appearance condition were prompted to “focus on Linda's picture and write about her physical appearance. Focus on both positive and negative aspects.” In the performance condition, they were prompted to focus on Linda's merits. Participants were asked to take at least 1 min to complete this task and were allowed several lines to answer.

Competence and warmth. In line with the conceptualization of sexual objectification as reduced perceptions of competence and warmth

(Heflick et al., 2011; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), participants were asked to rate both targets on these dimensions. As Leach et al. (2007) argue that warmth comprises both sociability and morality, we included both subfacets in our studies. At the end of the first task, participants rated the extent to which four adjectives related to competence (e.g., skillful), four related to sociability (e.g., friendly), and four related to morality (e.g., honest) (Fiske et al., 2002; Leach et al., 2007) applied to Linda (the sexualized woman) and, after the second task, to Emily (the nonsexualized job candidate). We used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *does not apply to Linda/Emily at all* and 7 = *does apply to Linda/Emily extremely well*). Competence was a reliable subscale ($\alpha = .93$ and $\alpha = .93$, for Linda and Emily, respectively), as were sociability ($\alpha = .92$ and $\alpha = .94$) and morality ($\alpha = .91$ and $\alpha = .93$).

Hiring probability of the female job candidate. We asked participants how likely they would be to hire Emily with the item “To what extent would you hire the candidate you were asked to review?” on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

Robustness check: Hiring of a male candidate. At the end of the third task, and after respondents rated the female candidate, we measured the likelihood of hiring a male candidate, using the same hiring item.

Control variables. We controlled for participants' gender (0 = male; 1 = female) and age because they can affect social perceptions (see, e.g., Duehr & Bono, 2006; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Since attractiveness has been related to how others perceive women (see, e.g., Dipboye et al., 1977; Hosoda et al., 2003; Moreland & Zajonc, 1982), like other scholars (e.g., Heflick et al., 2011), we controlled for the perceived attractiveness of the sexualized woman (Linda) with the following item: “In your view, to what extent is the woman you were asked to review physically attractive?” on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

Manipulation check. At the end of the survey, we asked participants to recall the picture of the sexualized woman (Linda) and rate the extent to which it was sexually suggestive (from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Note that we did not provide a picture of Emily Miller (i.e., the female job candidate).

5.2.2 | Results

Manipulation check

An ANOVA on perceived sexual suggestiveness revealed that participants viewing the sexualized image reported significantly more sexual suggestiveness than those viewing the nonsexualized one ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. $M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.22$; $F(1, 346) = 437.87$, $p < .001$), indicating that, as in the pilot study, the sexualization manipulation had the intended effect. Participants asked to focus on appearance did not differ from those asked to focus on performance in their reports about the picture's sexual suggestiveness ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 2.13$ and $M = 3.71$, $SD = 2.31$, respectively; $F(1, 346) = 1.06$,

¹All study materials described in this paper are available from the authors.

$p = .31$).² This condition (appearance vs. performance focus) neither had a significant main effect on any of the dependent variables nor interacted significantly with the sexualization condition. Given its lack of predictive power, we excluded this manipulation from our subsequent analyses.³

Measurement fit

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the factor structure of the dimensions indicative of objectification. The global fit indices of a three-factor model (competence, sociability, and morality) were very good: $\chi^2(44) = 87.45$, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .99, SRMR = .025. A two-factor model combining sociability and morality in the same dimension (i.e., warmth) was not significantly worse in fit than the three-factor one: $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.69$, $\Delta df = 2$, *ns*. However, a one-factor model did yield a significantly worse fit than the three-factor model: $\Delta\chi^2 = 231.09$, $\Delta df = 3$, $p < .001$. These results suggested that competence should be treated separately from sociability and morality. In our data, the models treating sociability and morality as separate dimensions or as a single dimension were similar in fit. To simplify the presentation of our results and in line with the literature, we treated competence separately and averaged the scores for sociability and morality into a single, underlying dimension, that is, warmth. In what follows, we refer to this dimension simply as warmth.⁴ Descriptive statistics and results of the CFA are displayed in Tables S1a and S2, respectively.

Sexualization spillover effect

Supporting Hypothesis 1, results showed that the effects of the sexualization manipulation (vs. nonsexualization) on both of the sexualized woman's (Linda's) own subscales were negative and significant ($b = -.36$, robust $SE = .11$, $p = .002$, for competence; $b = -.48$, robust $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, for warmth).

To explore Hypothesis 2, we first tested the direct effect of sexualization on perceptions of the nonsexualized woman. Specifically, we conducted linear regression analyses with the sexualization of the first woman as a predictor of the other nonsexualized woman's perceived competence and then her perceived warmth; we entered our control variables as covariates and used robust standard errors. Results showed that sexualization was negatively and significantly related to both Emily's competence ($b = -.19$, robust $SE = .09$, $p = .044$) and her warmth ($b = -.21$, robust $SE = .10$, $p = .039$). We then tested our prediction that when the initial woman (Linda) was sexualized, negative perceptions of her competence and warmth would mediate the impact of her sexualization on perceptions of the competence and warmth of the second, nonsexualized woman (Emily). As we expected, Linda's perceived competence was positively and

significantly related to Emily's perceived competence ($b = .47$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), as was Linda's warmth to Emily's warmth ($b = .66$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$).⁵ To assess the hypothesized indirect effects of Linda's sexualization on Emily's ratings via Linda's ratings of competence and warmth, we used a bootstrapping procedure to construct 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) for the effects, based on 5000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Hayes, 2018). The indirect effect of Linda's sexualization on perceptions of Emily's competence via perceptions of Linda's competence was negative and significant ($b = -.17$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI $[-.29, -.05]$). The indirect effect of Linda's sexualization on perceptions of Emily's warmth via perceptions of Linda's warmth was also negative and significant ($b = -.31$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI $[-.44, -.19]$). All in all, these results support a sexualization spillover effect, whereby sexualization objectifies a nonsexualized woman through objectifying the sexualized target (Hypothesis 2).

Effects on hiring

We next assessed whether sexualization influenced hiring through reduced perceptions of the competence and warmth of both the sexualized and nonsexualized women. Because hiring was skewed to the left (skewness = -1.71 , kurtosis = 6.83), we used a Poisson regression in the last part of the model. The perceived competence of the female job candidate was positively and significantly related to her hiring probability ($b = .40$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). In contrast, although warmth was positively related to hireability, the coefficient did not reach significance ($b = .11$, $SE = .08$, $p = .16$). These results partially supported Hypothesis 3.

With respect to Hypothesis 4, the results of testing the sequential mediation model showed that sexualizing a woman reduced the probability of hiring another woman ($b = -.09$, $SE = .03$, $p < .004$, 95% CI $[-.15, -.03]$). The indirect effect via competence was negative and significant ($b = -.06$, $SE = .03$, $p < .017$, 95% CI $[-.11, -.01]$), whereas the effect via warmth was negative but did not reach significance ($b = -.03$, $SE = .02$, $p < .188$, 95% CI $[-.07, .01]$). These findings supported in part our predictions.

Robustness checks

To assess the robustness of our reasoning that sexualization leads specifically to objectification rather than to generally negative evaluations of women, we conducted a multiple regression analysis using the first woman's attire, participant's gender, and their interaction as predictors of her perceived attractiveness. Results showed a significant effect for the attire condition ($p < .001$): She was perceived as more attractive when sexualized. Gender ($p = .97$) and its interaction with condition ($p = .10$) were not significant, but participants' age was ($p = .002$).

²We did not conduct a priori power analysis. A post hoc analysis showed a power of .99 for the present study (with an effect size of .40 and four groups).

³The results in this study were identical when the appearance focus (vs. performance focus) condition was included as a control variable.

⁴The results in both studies were identical when the three dimensions (competence, sociability, and morality) were treated separately. In the following study, we group the dimensions into two: competence and warmth (comprising items from the sociability and morality subfactors).

⁵To address potential endogeneity between the mediator and dependent variables, we introduced correlations between their error terms. The resulting correlation coefficients were not significant. We also ran two models, using OLS and 2SLS estimations (following recommendations by Antonakis et al., 2010). A Hausman test indicated that the OLS and 2SLS estimates did not significantly differ ($\chi(1) = .36$, $p = .55$ and $\chi(1) = .84$, $p = .36$ for competence and warmth, respectively), which suggests that endogeneity was not an issue in these analyses.

To assess our argument that activating the women-as-objects heuristic harms other women through stigma by association, we also checked whether exposure to a sexualized woman reduces the probability of hiring a nonsexualized male candidate. The results showed that sexualizing Linda was positively related to hiring the male candidate ($b = .07, p = .015$), and the total effect of sexualization was positive and significant ($b = .42, SE = .14, p = .002, 95\% CI [.15, .69]$).

5.2.3 | Discussion

Study 1 provided evidence for the sexualization spillover effect: Sexualization of an initial businesswoman reduced her perceived warmth and competence, which mediated the effect of her sexualization on a subsequent (nonsexualized) woman's perceived warmth and competence. This was the case even when participants were asked to think about the initial woman's performance merits rather than her appearance. Moreover, sexualization of an initial businesswoman made people less likely to hire the female job candidate and more likely to want to hire a male. This has obvious real-world implications, especially as the initial woman was wearing subtly sexualized business attire and the job applicant profiles were realistic.

Our results also provide evidence against two potential alternative explanations. We found reduced competence and warmth ratings of these women but increased attractiveness ratings, thus ruling out a reverse-halo explanation wherein sexualization leads to ubiquitous negativity (either by threatening self-esteem or by making negative valence salient). We can also rule out the explanation that sexualization intensifies a stereotype of femininity; women are stereotyped as low in competence but high in warmth, yet we found reduced perceptions of both.

In Study 2, we sought to replicate these effects while using a real-world, successful businesswoman as the sexualized initial woman and sampling higher level executives. This is important, as, in real life, evaluators are often highly experienced and have some previous knowledge of the sexy women they see, which may affect their business decisions.

5.3 | Study 2

5.3.1 | Method

Participants

Sample 1 was composed of 99 US-based employees recruited using an online panel (TurkPrime). Participants were on average 40.50 years old ($SD = 10.19$); 41.41% were female. Sample 2 was composed of 82 high-level executives of various nationalities participating in a prestigious executive MBA program of a European business school. Their average age was 35.23 years, and 27% were female. We performed our analyses combining both samples ($n = 181$) to enhance the

external validity of our study, controlling for subsample fixed effects (Curran & Hussong, 2009).⁶

Procedure and materials

In the first task of the survey, participants were told that “research shows that the extent to which people follow influencers depends on the image the influencer projects on the web. People form their social impressions almost on impulse, in a few seconds, from body language, dress, and physical appearance.” We next stated that we were interested in learning how people form these social perceptions and asked participants to wait for the system to assign them to one of the 25 top business influencers of 2018 from our database. For all participants, the assigned influencer was Martha Debayle, founder of Media Marketing Knowledge (a multimedia company producing content for women and parents). We manipulated sexualization with pictures of Ms. Debayle and asked participants to rate her competence and warmth.

Next, in a supposedly unrelated task in the second part of the survey, participants were asked to take on the role of an HR manager and evaluate the same unpictured, competent female job candidate as in Study 1 (Emily Miller), rating her competence and warmth, as well as deciding on her hiring, which were our final dependent variables.

Sexualization manipulation. We sexualized the business influencer again through dress (e.g., Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010), using revealing and non-revealing pictures available on the Internet. Both pictures were similar in size and posture. In the sexualized condition (1), Ms. Debayle wore feminine attire with a cleavage-enhancing shirt. In the control condition (0), she wore non-sexually suggestive attire.

Competence and warmth. At the end of each task, participants rated the business influencer (Ms. Debayle, Task 1) and the job candidate (Emily, Task 2) on competence and warmth, using the same items as in Study 1 (alpha reliabilities were .97 and .91 for Ms. Debayle's competence in Samples 1 and 2, respectively, .91 and .86 for Ms. Debayle's sociability, and .92 and .87 for Ms. Debayle's morality; alpha reliabilities were .95 and .91 for Emily's competence in Samples 1 and 2, respectively, .89 and .81 for Emily's sociability, and .92 and .78 for Emily's morality). As in Study 1, sociability and morality were combined into one dimension labeled “warmth.”

Hiring probability of the female job candidate. Participants rated the extent to which they would hire Emily Miller (the target of the sexualization spillover effect) with the same item used in Study 1.

Controls. We controlled for participants' gender and age and the perceived attractiveness of the sexualized target woman (Ms. Debayle) as in the previous study. In addition, following Heflick et al. (2011), we controlled for familiarity with Ms. Debayle using the following item:

⁶We repeated our analysis for each of the two samples separately, and results were substantially identical with respect to our hypotheses.

How familiar are you with the business influencer you were focusing on in the preceding task? (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *extremely*). (This control was not needed in Study 1, where the initial businesswoman was fictional).

5.3.2 | Results

Sexualization spillover effect

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table S1b. Results showed that sexualization had negative and significant effects on the perceived competence ($b = -.93$, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$) and warmth ($b = -.89$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$) of the initial woman (Ms. Debayle), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1.

To explore Hypothesis 2,⁷ we first conducted multiple regression analysis with robust standard errors, with sexualization of the initial woman and our control variables as predictors, and perceptions of the job candidate (Emily) as the dependent variable. Supporting our hypothesis, Ms. Debayle's sexualized attire was negatively related to Emily's perceived competence ($b = -.27$, $p = .022$) and warmth ($b = -.25$, $p = .059$). Then we tested the indirect effect.⁸ The sexualized attire had negative and significant effects on both of the sexualized woman's (i.e., Ms. Debayle's) subscales ($b = -.93$, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$, for competence; and $b = -.89$, $SE = .14$, $p < .001$, for warmth). Also, both Ms. Debayle's perceived competence and her warmth were positively and significantly related to ratings of the job candidate's (Emily) competence and warmth ($b = .18$ and $b = .40$, $p < .001$, for competence and warmth, respectively).

A bootstrapping procedure like that in Study 1 revealed that the indirect effect of Ms. Debayle's sexualization on perceptions of Emily's competence via perceptions of Ms. Debayle's own competence was negative and significant ($b = -.25$, 95% CI $[-.42, -.08]$), as was the indirect effect of Ms. Debayle's sexualization on perceptions of Emily's warmth via perceptions of Ms. Debayle's warmth ($b = -.36$, 95% CI $[-.50, -.23]$). Again, these results aligned with Hypothesis 2, suggesting a sexualization spillover effect on a nonsexualized woman mediated by objectification of the sexualized initial woman (reduced perceptions of competence and warmth).

Effects on hiring

We tested the consequences of sexualization for hiring the nonsexualized woman subject to the spillover effect (the female job candidate). Because hiring was skewed to the left (skewness = -1.82 , kurtosis = 7.25), we used a Poisson regression in the last part of the model. Perceptions of the competence and warmth of the female job candidate were positively related to hiring probability. As in Study 1, competence had a positive and significant effect ($b = .09$, $SE = .02$,

$p < .001$), whereas warmth had a positive but not significant one ($b = .03$, $SE = .02$, $p = .072$). These results were similar than those of Study 1 and partially supported Hypothesis 3.

We next assessed Hypothesis 4. The predicted sequential mediation through perceptions of competence and warmth was significant, indicating that sexualizing a woman reduced the probability of hiring another woman ($b = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $p = .002$, 95% CI $[-.03, -.01]$). The indirect effect through competence was negative and significant ($b = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $p < .023$, 95% CI $[-.029, -.002]$), and the effect through warmth was negative although it did not reach significance ($b = -.01$, $SE = .01$, $p = .074$, 95% CI $[-.022, .001]$).

Robustness checks

We tested for the effects of the sexualization manipulation on attractiveness and familiarity, as well as for any differences between the two subsamples. We conducted multiple regression analyses with sexualization, gender, age, and sample as predictors at Step 1 and the two-way interactions (Sexualization \times Gender and Sample \times Gender) at Step 2, treating familiarity and attractiveness as separate dependent variables. For familiarity, there were no significant main and interaction effects. For attractiveness, sexualized condition and gender were significant predictors ($.60$ and $.49$, $p < .01$, respectively). Participants in the sexualized condition perceived Ms. Debayle as more attractive than did those in the nonsexualized condition. Interestingly, women rated Ms. Debayle as more attractive than men did. No other interaction or main effects were significant.

5.3.3 | Discussion

Study 2 found that sexualization reduces beliefs that both the sexualized woman and a subsequent nonsexualized female job candidate are warm and competent. That is, it replicated, with a subsample of high-level executives and a real-world businesswoman as the target of sexualization, the effects that Study 1 found for a fictional person. These results were independent of familiarity with the real-world businesswoman and of her perceived attractiveness.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Given the vast sexualization of women in advertising, social media, and the film industry (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008), and the growing interest in dress codes and the physical appearance of female job candidates (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016), exploring the workplace consequences of sexualization is important for organizations. Our results revealed that sexualization of an initial businesswoman reduced her perceived warmth and competence. Further, these perceptions spilled over, reducing the perceived competence and warmth of unrelated, unsexualized women in the workplace. Importantly, sexualization of the initial woman also decreased intentions to hire the unrelated, nonsexualized woman (the target of the spillover effect) and increased intentions to hire a male candidate.

⁷A post hoc power analysis revealed powers of .94 and .98 for Samples 1 and 2, respectively (with an effect size of .40 and two groups).

⁸In this study also, we addressed endogeneity concerns estimating two models, using OLS and 2SLS estimations. A Hausman test indicated that, as in the previous study, the OLS and 2SLS estimates did not significantly differ ($\chi(1) = 3.654$, $p = .06$ and $\chi(1) = .01$, $p = .92$ for competence and warmth, respectively) and therefore that endogeneity was not challenging our conclusions.

Our findings have important practical implications for inequities in personnel decisions and for women's lived experiences in the workplace more broadly. They also extend research into the processes of sexual objectification at work and in particular the sexualization spillover effect.

6.1 | Theoretical contributions

Our paper contributes to the literature on bias against women at work in various ways. First, we document the effects of sexualization on perceptions of female job candidates and on hiring decisions—an important bias that women may suffer in the workplace. Past literature has focused mainly on differences between men and women in hiring. For example, male applicants in STEM and science work contexts receive better evaluations (Reuben et al., 2014; Steinpreis et al., 1999) and are rated as significantly more hireable than female applicants (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). In business contexts, meta-analyses have found small but statistically significant preferences for male candidates in managerial positions (e.g., Koch et al., 2015), and such biases and discrimination have been explained by sexist perceptions against women (Vial et al., 2019). Still, the role that sexualization plays in the hiring context has been often neglected in past research. Rather than merely focusing on differences between male and female candidates, we advance knowledge in this literature by focusing on a detrimental effect of sexualization for women at work.

By doing so, we also contribute to the objectification literature. Construct accessibility sets the stage for a spillover effect of sexualization in the workplace. This phenomenon, referred to as the afterglow of construct accessibility (Rudman & Borgida, 1995) or the carryover effect (Glick et al., 2005), has been rarely explored. Unlike the few other studies on the spillover effects of sexualization on other women, our study sampled both female and male employed individuals and examined the effects of inexplicit, nonpornographic sexualization on objectifying female job candidates described as competent and successful. This is arguably a “cleaner” operationalization of sexualization than previous work (avoiding other stimuli that could arouse negative beliefs about women) and a conservative test of the effects of sexualization in the workplace that mirrors individuals' real experiences. Theoretically, our finding that the sexualization spillover effect is mediated by objectification of sexualized businesswomen is consistent with studies on construct accessibility (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987).

By contrast, our objectification predictions are not consistent with the notions that sexualization (a) activates typical broad gender stereotypes and (b) primes general negativity. Gender stereotype research (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Eagly, 2008) could be used to predict that sexualization drives stereotypical representations of women as low in competence and high in warmth. But like Heflick et al. (2011), we found that sexualization reduced perceptions of both competence and warmth. Second, the theory of a reverse-halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) suggests that sexualized women, once denigrated on one trait, would be perceived more negatively on all traits,

including those that measure humanness (i.e., warmth and competence). Our findings show that while sexualization reduces perceived warmth and competence, consistent with past research (Heflick et al., 2011), it does not necessarily reduce (and can increase) perceived attractiveness. Additional studies should include a more extensive list of dimensions beyond physical attractiveness, to understand the consequences of sexualization more comprehensively.

Most importantly, we extend knowledge on the different mechanisms at play in social judgments of women at work. Theories so far have explained biased judgments of their competence as resulting either from categorization processes (gender stereotypes) or from personal characteristics (attractiveness, height, and weight). Drawing from the objectification and the social cognition literatures, our model recognizes that social judgments are complex (Kulik et al., 2007) and can be affected by multiple processes simultaneously (Smith & Zarate, 1992).

Our study also bridges organizational and psychological streams of research and shows that sexualization has consequences not only for perceptions of competence and warmth but also for hiring decisions. Our focus was on how sexualizing a woman affects the hiring probability of another woman. Our results show that sexualization reduces intentions to hire a female job candidate that was unrelated to the sexualized woman. These findings extend Rudman and Borgida's (1995) work by showing that even when sexualization is subtle and not directly tied to negative perceptions in other ways (i.e., revealing business attire rather than pornographic material), it harms female job candidates' career prospects.

An influential report by the APA (2007) suggested that sexualization spreads cultural messages regarding women's value and contributes to gender inequality (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016), sexism (Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Kistler & Lee, 2009; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015), negative attitudes toward women (Aubrey et al., 2011; Dill et al., 2008; Galdi et al., 2014; Pacilli et al., 2019), and an overall climate that undermines women and their contributions (Merskin, 2004) in and outside the workplace. Similarly, cognitive psychology explains how expectations pertaining to members of certain social categories are internalized and develop over time. Individuals have mental representations of prototypical members of a social category, for example, of women (how they behave and who they are). These prototypical views tend to be socially shared, normative, and categorical. However, individuals' own experiences develop more idiosyncratic views (Andersen et al., 1995; Smith & Zarate, 1992). Our study shows that sexualization affects judgments of another subsequently evaluated, nonsexualized woman. However, to what extent, or under what conditions, these evaluations impact views of women in general needs to be addressed in future research.

Finally, our findings complement the work of Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) and Heflick et al. (2011) on the minimal conditions needed to objectify women. These authors have shown that merely focusing on a successful woman's appearance (e.g., Sarah Palin and Angelina Jolie) can elicit objectification. We similarly show that simply wearing business attire that shows the female body can do so as well. This is important in relation to women's everyday experiences at

work. After all, “women do not typically walk around in swimsuits” (Heflick et al., 2011, p. 579), but they are objectified anyway. Also, although research has shown that negative perceptions can be stronger when raters do not belong to the group suffering discrimination (e.g., males rating professional women, Eagly & Karau, 2002), our findings largely show that a sexualized target is objectified regardless of the evaluator's gender.⁹ Further investigation of this issue is important.

6.2 | Limitations and future directions

Future studies are needed to replicate our results across other cultures, professions, and industries. We have no theoretical reasons to expect that our research setting accounts for our conclusions, given that online panel samples have been shown to produce high-quality data (Bartneck et al., 2015; Casler et al., 2013; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). In addition, our executive sample of Study 2 included participants of various nationalities. Still, future studies should use other samples to replicate our findings. Relatedly, although our theoretical rationale in developing our prediction is not tied to a specific culture, cultural factors may influence our results. Our manipulation used only Caucasian women, bypassing ethnicity. Future research aiming to replicate our findings in other cultures may benefit from considering other ethnicities.

We do not, of course, claim that sexualization is the most important factor influencing HR selection processes. For managerial positions, those processes are complex, typically comprising various stages, assessments, external references, and personality tests. In our studies, we proxied this process by providing qualitative comments regarding the candidate's strengths and past assessments. Future research may more closely mirror this process by providing more information about the candidate to participants.

Although sexualization reduces the perceived warmth and competence of women, there are certainly other processes that trigger negative evaluations of people—for example, priming certain stereotypes (e.g., disabled and elderly) may harm perceptions of both warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2007). Future studies can build a more comprehensive model of processes that can lead to negative evaluations of women at work. Future research may also test emotional mechanisms of the sexualization spillover effect, in line with findings by Castaño et al. (2019) showing that in top executive posts, sexy women arouse more negative feelings and fewer positive ones than other women.

Our results suggest that although sexualization leads to women being perceived more negatively in some domains, it improves perceptions of their attractiveness. In the light of findings about

objectification (Heflick et al., 2011), we controlled for attractiveness of the initial woman, which should be related to desirable rewards (Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006) in the work domain (Hosoda et al., 2003). However, experimental research has also demonstrated that female leaders are devalued (in comparison to male ones) regarding their performance, competence (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985), and hireability (Johnson et al., 2010) when they are very attractive. Sexy women are evaluated particularly negatively (Cuadrado et al., 2021; Glick et al., 2005; Howlett et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018; Wookey et al., 2009). Glick et al. (2005) showed that people exhibit more negative affect toward sexily attired businesswomen than toward women dressed in a non-sexually-suggestive, business-like manner. Complementarily, Bradley et al. (2005) found that the use of sexual power backfires in terms of lower salary and career outcomes. The negative social and work-related consequences that sexualization carries may be due to the violation of traditional female gender roles (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002). Despite being seen as more attractive, women who self-sexualize transgress gender roles and are consequently punished. Future studies can explore this further, as well as whether sexualized women are punished despite being empowered (De Wilde et al., 2021) and despite other untested, positive consequences in (and beyond) the workplace.

Relatedly, whereas objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) predicts that women are viewed as having less mental ability regardless of attractiveness, the physical attractiveness of the nonsexualized female job candidate being evaluated may matter—but in ways that differ by the gender of the evaluator. Addressing the inconclusive research results on whether men are likelier to penalize women out of gender-biased preconceptions (Carli et al., 1995; Heilman et al., 2004; Rudman, 1998), future research may test whether sexualization affects the perceived warmth and competence of a physically attractive nonsexualized female job candidate differently when the evaluator is a man versus a woman. This hypothesis is consistent with Gervais et al.'s (2013) finding that the beauty premium (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991) is likelier to be paid by men than by women and by research showing that people prefer attractive opposite-sex applicants (mate selection) and women prefer female applicants with low attractiveness (intrasexual competition; see Luxen & Van de Vijver, 2006). Clearly, future research is needed on these interactions, and such research needs to account more comprehensively for evaluators' gender identity, including LGBTI identities.

Moreover, according to the APA (2007) task force report, sexualization has broader effects in society because it affects how people judge and respond to women in their daily interactions. Research on sexualization has shown that women and men exposed to sexually suggestive images of women are more likely to accept sex role stereotypes that affect women in general than are subjects in control conditions (e.g., Daniels & Zurbruggen, 2016; Milburn et al., 2000; Ward, 2003). How sexualization affects women in general did not constitute the focus of this paper. Rather, we focus on the spillover effect in the work domain. That is, although relational representations based on one-on-one past experiences with specific individuals guide automatically how people interact in their social encounters

⁹In Study 1 only, the objectification of the sexualized target was stronger for male than for female evaluators on one dimension of humanness. The interaction “Evaluator Gender × Linda's Competence” significantly predicted Emily's competence, $-0.24, p = .004$. The correlation between perceptions of Emily's and Linda's competence was stronger for men, $r = .65$, than for women, $r = .35$. The interactions were not significant with respect to warmth.

(Andersen & Cole, 1990; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2004), we did not tackle the question of whether and how sexualization might impact general gender stereotypes that can affect women in society more broadly. Bargh et al. (1988) suggest that high frequency of prior construct activation produces chronic accessibility. This would imply that frequent exposure to sexualization might contribute to shape general female stereotypes over time. Although this prediction is plausible, it was beyond the scope of the current paper. Future research can explore the consequences of sexualization for female stereotypes in our society. Relatedly, traditional gender roles portray women in general as high in warmth and low in competence. However, people do not judge every single woman that way. Similarly, although our results suggest that sexualization reduces warmth and competence, they do not imply that *all* women encountered in the future are going to be seen as cold and incompetent. One possibility is that the effects apply only to certain contexts or that if sexualization was less prevalent in society, women could, presumably, be perceived even more warmly. Future studies need to address these issues.

How long does the sexualization effect last? Our studies were not designed to address this specifically. In Study 1, we asked half of the participants to write about Linda's merits for some minutes, to mirror real experiences of switching focus in the world of work and increase the generalizability of our findings. We found that this intervening job-related task (of focusing on Linda's merits) was not enough to override the negative consequences of sexualization. Although this finding contradicts Johnson and Gurung's (2011) evidence that the effects of women's objectification can be reduced by drawing attention to their competence, these authors focused on college-aged women dressed provocatively, and the evaluators were women. Future research can clarify these issues by explicitly testing the role of age, as well as how long the objectification effect lasts—whether it decreases over time (e.g., after an hour) or remains strong for a very long time, as studies in cognitive psychology have shown (Higgins, 1996). Longitudinal studies may be helpful in this regard. In addition, the accessibility of primed constructs may depend on pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. The greater the overlap between an individual's pre-existing beliefs and the attended features of a stimulus, the greater the likelihood that the knowledge will be subsequently activated (Higgins, 1989). It is thus possible that the effect of a sexualization prime lasts longer for individuals who have pre-existing sexist beliefs than for those who do not—an intriguing avenue for future studies.

Further, we focused only on the consequences of women's sexualization, leaving aside men's, because sexualizing women seems to be much more common in our society than sexualizing men (Arnold, 2021). And in a professional context, women have more choice about their attire (Smith et al., 2018) and have more ways to sexualize their clothing than men (Watkins et al., 2013). In line with our choice, the objectification and gender literatures show that sexualization seems to be especially relevant and worrisome for women (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and a recent meta-analysis has shown that women's sexual behavior is judged more negatively than men's (Rudman et al., 2013; see Endendijk et al., 2020, for a review).

Our own finding in Study 1 shows that the sexualization of woman increased intentions to hire an unrelated male candidate. However, we acknowledge that while some researchers have not found that sexualized men were objectified (e.g., Bernard et al., 2012; Heflick et al., 2011; Vaes et al., 2011), others have found that they were (e.g., Gervais et al., 2012; Loughnan et al., 2010), and future studies can explore how sexualization affects men in the workplace.

6.3 | Workplace implications

The workplace implications of this research for women are worrisome. Past research has found that women in business attire are perceived as less warm and competent when focus is on their physical appearance (Heflick et al., 2011). Our research shows that, even without that focus, implicit sexualization also has this effect and that this can lead to detrimental effects for subsequently evaluated women seeking employment. For example, sexualization can lead to negative evaluations in interviews for leadership positions where evaluators physically see a sexualized woman and are called to judge both her hireability and that of other nonsexualized female candidates. More broadly, being exposed to sexualized businesswomen in one setting such as a business lunch can influence subsequent evaluations of women in other work settings, including hiring processes. We tried to make our study conditions closer to real life in the business world than were the conditions in previous research. The woman seeking employment was described in her application materials as competent and well qualified (not merely pictured, as in previous work). The woman in the sexualized condition was also depicted in business clothes and described as well qualified and competent. Our studies directly assessed hiring intentions, and most participants in each sample were business professionals or had higher education degrees. It seems likely that sexualization in a real-world context, where interviews for important leadership positions are conducted in person by a panel composed of both men and women, would have similar effects on the hiring of women. Clearly, research on hiring inequities should take sexualization into account—not only its effects on the sexualized woman herself but also its potential spillover onto other unrelated women. And researchers should investigate the likely consequences of such spillovers for women's psychological well-being.

6.4 | A path forward?

Our findings suggest that all women are vulnerable to the effects of sexual objectification in ways that can impair their success at work. The fact that women can be objectified given minimal cues (feminine business attire, or merely a focus on appearance; see Heflick et al., 2011)—even cues in images of other women—has a number of important implications for women at work. There seems to be no doubt that sexualizing a woman strips her of warmth and competence in the eyes of others, potentially damaging her job evaluations and chances of career advancement, and this even if she is portrayed as

skillful and efficacious in her job. Some writers (e.g., Gray et al., 2011) have suggested that women need to work on giving a “good impression” in work settings, for example, trying not to look too attractive in job interviews. This advice may backfire because it primes women to focus on their own appearance (“What do I wear?” “Am I dressed appropriately?”), leading to self-objectification (Puvia & Vaes, 2013) and decreasing their well-being at work. Such advice puts the burden of preventing objectification on women's shoulders.

We believe that a healthier approach to this issue is for organizations to actively manage the consequences of sexualization at work. For example, crucial HR decisions (e.g., hiring, promotion, and variable pay allocations) may be susceptible to bias from sexualization, even when no image of the applicant is present. Raising awareness among decision makers through training programs on sexualization and related sexist attitudes and their consequences can also foster fair workplaces. Finally, there is evidence that dehumanizing women can play a role in legitimating aggression (e.g., Bar-Tal, 2000). Organizations need to pay close attention to these processes to ensure that women are treated fairly, and with respect, in the workplace.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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