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**From sexualized media consumption to salary negotiation: The relation between chronic self-objectification processes and women's negotiation intentions**

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## FROM SEXUALIZED MEDIA TO SALARY NEGOTIATION

### Abstract

Despite the advancement in women's conditions in the past fifty years, women are still the targets of forms of oppression that span from sexual objectification to gender economic inequality, which, among other factors, is linked to challenges that women may face with wage negotiation. Bridging these two research areas, in the present correlational study ( $N = 552$ ), we took the female target perspective and investigated whether everyday sexualized media consumption may be indirectly linked with Italian women's negotiation intentions in a working scenario (i.e., salary request, negotiation probability, salary raise negotiation). We hypothesized that this association would be mediated by internalization of mainstream beauty ideals, chronic self-objectification, and subsequent lower self-attribution of the fundamental social dimensions of competence, agency, and morality. Path analyses supported the indirect path model on all the negotiation behaviors via self-attribution of competence; a significant indirect path via self-attribution of morality was also found on women's negotiation probability. Implications for gender economic inequality as well as possible interventions are discussed.

*Keywords:* sexualized media; internalization of beauty ideals; self-objectification; competence; negotiation behavior; women's salary.

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From sexualized media consumption to salary negotiation: The relation between chronic self-objectification processes and women's salary negotiation intentions.

In the past century, women's life condition in Western countries has radically changed achieving ever wider freedom and opportunities of expression. However, despite the progress, women still suffer from more or less blatant forms of oppression that span from gender economic inequalities to sexual objectification. In 2018, the gender employment gap and the gender pay gap in the EU stood at 11.7% and 14.1% respectively, and they have remained stable over the last decade (EU27 data). Several explanations have been proposed, such as the under-representation of women in STEM fields and leadership positions (EU27 data; World Economic Forum, 2021), which are linked to higher wages. While these factors contribute to explaining general gender economic inequalities, gender differences in negotiation skills and performance are proposed as a crucial factor specifically explaining gender wage inequalities for similar jobs, as wages and careers advancements are often negotiated within an organization (e.g., Babcock et al., 2006; Mazei et al., 2015; Kugler et al., 2018). In this regard, Italy, where the present study was conducted, was ranked in 2021 as the worst country in Western Europe and was placed at the bottom of the worldwide list (127 out of 156 countries) in terms of wage equality for similar jobs (World Economic Forum, 2021). Specifically, for the same job roles, Italian women earn 11.5% less than men in annual gross salary (Job Pricing, 2021). Therefore, investigating factors that might hinder women's negotiation performance is of utmost importance.

Paralleling gender pay inequalities, women, more than men, are often targets of sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women experience sexual objectification every day through sexualized media and about every two days in interpersonal interactions (Holland et al., 2017). According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), living in such an objectifying cultural milieu acculturates girls and women to

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place greater importance and attention on their physical appearance over their capabilities, a process termed self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In the last two decades, a vast body of literature demonstrated the numerous negative repercussions of sexual objectification and, as a result of its prevalence, media effects were given significant attention (Ward, 2016). Notably, both acute and everyday exposure to sexualized media are linked to women's higher self-objectification, internalization of sociocultural beauty ideals, and diminished view of sexualized women's competence, morality, and humanity (see Ward, 2016 for a review). Interestingly, it seems that this dehumanizing gaze toward sexualized women can be internalized. Indeed, experiences of sexual objectification have been associated with lower self-attributions of competence, agency, and morality (Baldissarri et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2013; Loughnan et al., 2017). Additionally, sexual objectification might impact women's careers, as it is linked to lower interest in STEM subjects (Daniels & Robnett, 2021), poorer cognitive performance (see Winn & Cornelius, 2020 for a review), and lower general self-confidence that they can achieve their goals (Bem-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). These findings support the pervasiveness of sexual objectification's consequences on women's lives.

Drawing from this literature, the present study investigated novel potential negative ramifications of the objectification framework on Italian women's salary negotiation intentions in employment scenarios. We reasoned that one of the factors that may contribute to women's lower salary negotiation could be chronic self-objectification processes. To address this aim, we employed a cross-sectional correlational design to evaluate a sequential path model that indirectly links higher everyday sexualized media exposure to women's lower negotiation performance. Specifically, we hypothesized that this process would occur via a chain of associations that links chronic sexualized media consumption to the internalization of beauty ideals, chronic self-objectification, and lower self-attribution of

competence, agency, and morality. We now review the relevant literature in support of the proposed path model.

### **Sexual objectification of women and the contribution of sexualized media**

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) was developed to study the psychological and intra-personal consequences of sexual objectification on women. Sexual objectification occurs whenever a person is reduced to their body, body parts, and/or sexual functions, and used for the pleasure of others (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women, more than men, are sexually objectified in multiple life circumstances (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Holland et al., 2017). However, mass media play a crucial and insidious role in the diffusion and maintenance of a culture that sexually objectifies women (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This idea is much in line with the cultivation theory of media communication (Gerbner, 1998), which posits that media messages can shape individuals' perceptions of reality by presenting a consistent worldview over time.

Content analyses show that various media formats, including the Internet and social media, are imbued with sexualized<sup>1</sup> representations of women to a greater extent than men (e.g., Conley & Ramsey 2011; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Heldman et al., 2016; Smith et al. 2019). Indeed, women are frequently shown in skimpy and/or provocative attires, while taking on sensual poses that communicate sexual accessibility (for reviews see Galdi & Guizzo, 2021; Lamb & Koven, 2019; Ward, 2016). Italian media fit well with the trend just described. Several Italian TV programs and commercials offer stereotyped, sexualized, and objectified depictions of women (e.g., Valtorta et al., 2016). Overall, there is evidence of a trend toward the sexualization of women in the media, which contributes to setting a cultural

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<sup>1</sup> According to the definition of APA (2007), sexualization represents a broad concept, which includes sexual objectification (see also Karsay et al., 2018 and Ward, 2016 for a discussion).

standard that equates women to sexual objects. Then, how can massive and continuous exposure to sexualized media impact its users, particularly women?

### **From sexualized media to the internalization of beauty ideals and self-objectification**

One psychological consequence of repeated exposure to sexualized media is the internalization of the cultural beauty ideals promoted by such media messages (Vandenbosh & Eggermont, 2012). Sexualized media represent a narrow beauty ideal of women as slim, young, attractive, and sensual, and help disseminate the idea that only individuals complying with that narrow standard are sexually attractive. Repeated exposure to such ideals can acculturate women to adopt them as their own. This process is not only in line with general cultivation theory's principles (Gerbner, 1998), but also with media theories drawing from schema and priming (e.g., Huesmann, 1986; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), such as the 3AM model (Wright, 2011). Specifically, sexually objectifying media play a role in viewers learning new scripts, activating previously acquired ones, and encouraging their use, ultimately reinforcing their chronic accessibility (Wright, 2011). Consistently, research has established that such exposure fosters women's acceptance and internalization of these ideals, which are used as a reference point for self-evaluation (e.g., Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

In line with objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), another insidious psychological consequence of sexualized media consumption is self-objectification (Karsay et al., 2018). Girls and women learn to internalize the observer's objectifying gaze, to see themselves as bodies to be evaluated by others, and to a form of self-consciousness characterized by habitual monitoring of one's own physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lindner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2017). In other words, women come to value more how their body looks externally than what it feels and does, defining themselves in terms of

physical appearance and sexual attractiveness rather than ability and competence (see also Roberts et al., 2018).

Self-objectification can be situationally activated by sexually objectifying experiences, such as acute exposure to sexualized media (state self-objectification), as well as become a pervasive and habitual way of relating with one's body (chronic self-objectification<sup>2</sup>) (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Winn & Cornelius, 2020). In this study, we focused on chronic self-objectification. Both acute and habitual exposure to sexualized media are respectively linked with state and chronic self-objectification among women (see Karsay et al., 2018 for a meta-analysis; Ward, 2016 for a review) and young girls (see Daniels et al., 2020 for a review). Regarding media format, social media, the internet, and video games have a greater impact on self-objectification compared to television (including TV programs and music videos), although the latter remains the most influential traditional media, while print media have no effect (see Karsay et al., 2018 for a meta-analysis).

Crucially, extending the objectification theoretical model, the internalization of beauty ideals has been recognized as the mechanism underlying the relation between everyday sexualized media consumption and women's chronic self-objectification (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). In other words, media-based internalized beauty ideals guide women to focus their attention on their bodies to check whether their physical appearance is up to those standards, resulting in self-objectification (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Morry & Staska, 2001; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). To summarize, everyday consumption of sexualized media is associated with women's chronic self-objectification through the internalization of (unrealistic) beauty ideals.

Extensive literature has shown that media-triggered self-objectification is associated with several negative psychological consequences for women (for reviews see Ward, 2016;

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<sup>2</sup> We prefer the term chronic instead of trait as the latter is typically ascribed to biologically-based characteristics that remain stable over time (see Winn & Corenlius, 2020 for a discussion)

Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Crucially for our study, women under sexually objectifying circumstances (e.g., receiving objectifying comments; recalling past experiences of objectification) may come to see themselves as less competent, moral, and agentic (Loughnan et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2013). These are fundamental social judgment dimensions that have been linked with hiring decisions, career success, and salary worth (e.g., Abele, 2003; Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016; Moscatelli et al., 2020) and, consequently, may play a role in salary negotiation behaviors. In the following paragraph, we review this emerging literature.

### **Repercussions on self-perception of competence, agency, and morality**

It is well established that women depicted in sexualized ways, or on whom a narrow focus on appearance has been placed, are more susceptible to being dehumanized, which affects how they are perceived and potentially treated by others (for reviews Bernard et al., 2020; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014). Accordingly, many studies demonstrated that, in such circumstances, women are more likely to be perceived as lacking fundamental attributes such as competence (e.g., Heflick et al., 2009, 2011; Bernard & Wollast, 2019), morality (Gramazio et al., 2021; Heflick et al., 2011; Bernard & Wollast, 2019), agency (Cikara et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2011; Holland & Haslam, 2013), and sociability (Heflick et al., 2011; Bernard & Wollast, 2019), compared to non-sexualized targets.

Scholars recently proposed that such judgments can impact how the targets see themselves (Loughnan et al., 2017; Pecini et al. 2023). Specifically, women experiencing sexual objectification may not just adopt the observer's viewpoint about their bodies (i.e., self-objectify), but could also internalize the observer's overall judgements, thus perceiving themselves as possessing fewer fundamental social qualities. In line with this idea, Loughnan et al. (2017) elicited a condition of sexual objectification by asking female participants to remember a real situation in which they had been sexually objectified. Compared to baseline measurements, after the manipulation women self-attributed less competence, warmth, and



humanity (see also Chen et al., 2013 for similar results on morality). Similarly, Baldissarri et al. (2019) asked female participants to sign up on a fictitious website and to provide a brief description of themselves along with a photo. Participants then received either an objectifying (i.e., focusing on the physical appearance in the photo), non-objectifying (i.e., focusing on the personal description) or neutral response from a male senior user. Women in the objectifying condition (vs. other conditions) self-attributed fewer mental states and perceived themselves to have lower free will, a dimension that is related to the sense of agency (e.g., Mele, 2017). Altogether, sexually objectifying interactions may lead women to self-objectify and to see themselves as possessing fewer fundamental dimensions of social perception, such as competence, agency, and morality.

The studies mentioned above focused on the impact of interpersonal experiences of sexual objectification. However, it is well established that the most common and pervasive way women experience sexual objectification is through repeated exposure to sexualized media (APA, 2007; Holland et al., 2017; Ward, 2016). Therefore, in the present study, we extend previous research by specifically focusing on sexualized media, investigating whether everyday exposure to such media might be linked to women's decreased sense of competence, agency, and morality via the internalization of mainstream beauty ideals and subsequent chronic self-objectification. We also assess whether this process would have spillover repercussions on women's negotiation intentions in a job-related scenario.

### **Repercussions on negotiation intentions**

Negotiation skills are important economic decision-making abilities in work settings, as they contribute to advancement in salaries and careers (Kugler et al., 2018). Several studies showed that women are less likely to initiate a negotiation than men (see Kugler et al., 2018 for a meta-analysis), and these results have been corroborated on adolescent early workers (Borg & Wood, 2021). Considering the importance of negotiation skills in one's

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work success, scholars argue that gender differences in these skills and in negotiation performance may contribute to the gender pay gap (e.g., Babcock et al., 2006; Greig, 2008; Mazei et al., 2015; Kugler et al., 2018).

Gender differences in negotiation depend on several factors, including the amount of ambiguity on what is or is not negotiable and stereotype threat (Recalde & Vesterlund, 2020, for a review). However, to our knowledge, no study so far has investigated the potential role of everyday sexualized media consumption and chronic self-objectification on women's negotiation performance. It is well established that women perform poorly in conditions of self-objectification triggered by sexually objectifying interpersonal experiences and media (e.g., Aubrey & Gerding, 2015; Gay & Castano, 2010; Guizzo & Cadinu, 2017; Kahalon et al., 2018; Winn & Cornelius, 2020 for a review). Sexualized media exposure is also associated with women's lower confidence in their ability to achieve their goals (Bem-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

Nonetheless, far less is known about the impact of sexualized media on women's economic decision-making, such as wage negotiation. One notable exception is the study by Carlsson et al. (2022). The authors exposed female participants to either sexualized or neutral media. Afterward, they measured participants' levels of self-objectification and asked them to state the minimum compensation they wished to receive for participating in a second study. Women exposed to sexualized media reported higher self-objectification compared to women in the control condition. However, sexualization did not affect women's requests for compensation. The authors concluded that sexualized media seemed to not affect women's economic behaviors, at least not directly. We argue that, first, situational exposure alone may not be sufficient to directly impact women's compensation requests and the phenomenon might more likely stem from chronic processes of repeated exposure to sexual objectification in the media and subsequent internalization of this perspective.

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Second, we think that other variables may indirectly link chronic sexualized media consumption and self-objectification to women's economic decision-making. Specifically, the social dimensions of competence, agency, and morality have been shown not only to be implicated in (self) objectification processes (see Bernard et al., 2020 for a review), but also to be very relevant in the assessment of job candidates. For example, the dimensions of competence and morality (more than sociability) are used to form impressions of female candidates, guide hiring decisions, and predict their career success (Moscatelli et al., 2020). Additionally, possessing agentic traits is positively correlated with higher salary expectations for job candidates who exhibit such characteristics (Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). Thus, female candidates are affected by a perfection bias and need to possess all these dimensions as prerequisites for building a successful career, whereas men tend to be evaluated only based on competence (Moscatelli et al., 2020). We reasoned that this perfection bias might also affect women's self-perception, so that the lower their self-attribution of these qualities the lower their own salary worth perception, thereby impacting their likelihood of engaging in negotiation. Supporting this reasoning, higher self-attribution of agency and competence (but not sociability) is correlated with higher income and employment status for both men and women (Abele, 2003; Abele & Spurk, 2011; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Ko, 2012).

In addition, although no study is available on self-attribution of morality and salary or career success, morality is a fundamental dimension involved in self-perception (Wojciszke, 2005), linked to overall self-esteem (Soral & Kofka, 2020), suggesting its relevance in the present context. Drawing from this literature and considering that women, under conditions of sexual objectification and self-objectification perceive themselves as lacking these fundamental qualities, we explored whether lower self-perception of competence, agency, and morality triggered by chronic self-objectification might be linked to lower negotiation performance in

an employment scenario (i.e., salary request, wage negotiation probability, salary raise negotiation).

### **Overview of the study**

To summarize, building on previous research, we aimed at testing a new ramification of the objectification framework linking everyday sexualized media consumption to women's negotiation intentions in a working scenario. To do so, we employed a cross-sectional correlational design and tested a path model.

The following hypotheses and research question were put forward. In line with previous research (Vandenbosh & Eggermont, 2012; Feltman & Szymanski, 2018), we hypothesized that chronic consumption of sexualized media would predict higher internalization of mainstream beauty ideals (*hypothesis 1a*), which would be linked with higher chronic self-objectification among women (*hypothesis 1b*). Moreover, building on previous studies showing reductions in women's self-perception of competence, agency, and morality under sexual objectification (Baldissarri et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2013; Loughnan et al., 2017), we examined whether chronic self-objectification would also be associated with lower self-attribution of such qualities (*hypothesis 2*). Additionally, we explored whether lower self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality would, in turn, be associated with lower negotiation behavioral intentions (i.e., salary request; probability to negotiate after a counteroffer; salary raise negotiation) (*Research Question 1 – RQ1*). This exploration builds on literature indicating that women underperform when self-objectification is activated, especially if they have high chronic self-objectification (Winn & Cornelius, 2020 for a review), and that competence, agency, and morality are crucial predictors of career success (e.g., Abele, 2003; Moscatelli., 2020).

To summarize, using a cross-sectional correlational design, we examined whether women who habitually consume sexualized media, internalize the mainstream cultural beauty

ideal, and chronically self-objectify are more likely to self-attribute lower competence, agency, and morality and, in turn, are less willing to negotiate in an employment scenario.

### Method

#### Participants

Eight hundred and three Italian participants provided informed consent and fully completed an online survey. However, 77 participants failed the attention check and were excluded from the analyses. Moreover, based on our theoretical perspective and proposed model, we excluded 168 men and six individuals who did not identify with any gender. Therefore, our final sample comprised 552 women with an average age of  $M = 27.05$  ( $SD = 8.61$ ;  $Mdn = 23$ ; Age-range = 18-60 years old). Most of them were students ( $n = 332$ , 60.1%), while the remaining part included workers ( $n = 192$ , 34.8%) and unemployed individuals (5.1%). Most of them had a high school diploma or a lower educational level ( $n = 310$ , 56.2%), whereas the others reported higher educational levels ( $n = 223$ , 40.4%), or other qualifications ( $n = 9$ , 3.4%). Regarding sexual orientation, most women reported being heterosexual ( $n = 502$ , 92.6%), while the remaining participants reported being bisexual ( $n = 24$ , 4.4%), lesbian ( $n = 9$ , 1.7%) or having other sexual orientations ( $n = 7$ , 1.3%); 10 participants (1.8%) did not provide a response. Most of our participants reported using social media (75%) and watching TV series (59%) at least 1-2 hours per day (daily media usage average  $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .63$ ; see procedure for details). Participants reported having a good level of academic/working self-esteem ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ; see procedure for details). Finally, participants' self-reported socio-economic status was just above the Italian average ( $M = 57.12$ ,  $SD = 17.17$ ; scale ranging from 0 = "way below the Italian average" to 100 = "way above the Italian average"). The sensitivity power analyses ( $\alpha = .05$ ,  $1 - \beta = .80$ ) computed on the available experimental sample ( $N = 552$ ) indicated that the minimal detectable effect (MDE) was equal to  $r = .19$ , which fell in the small effect area.

### Procedure

The study was conducted online on Qualtrics platform. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis via messages and posts on social media (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook) and via a snowball sampling procedure. No compensation was provided for participation. The invitation included a link to the survey and a brief description of the study, which was presented as allegedly aimed at validating novel scales measuring attitudes and decision-making in working scenarios. Participants were invited to fill out the questionnaires in a quiet place to avoid distractions and interruptions. After providing informed consent, participants completed measures of general daily media usage (5 items, e.g., “Use social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp)”; “Watch TV series and movies (both on TV and on streaming platforms)”; responses were gathered on a 7-point scale, *1 = never, less than 10 mins*, *2 = 10-30 mins*, *3 = 31-60 mins*, *4 = 1-2 hrs.*, *5 = 3-4 hrs.*, *6 = 5-6 hrs.*, *7 = more than 6 hrs.*) and exposure to sexualized media (see measures below). Afterward, we measured participants’ level of internalization of sociocultural beauty ideals and chronic self-objectification. To support the cover story and reduce demand characteristics, we included filler items about environmental habits and attitudes. Afterwards, we assessed participants’ degree of self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality in relation to their academic or work field. Finally, participants were introduced to a working scenario. Given that our target sample was mostly composed of university students, to increase participants’ identification with the protagonist, we proposed a paid internship as a working scenario, as it is a job-like position easier to relate to the status of university students. First, we asked participants to choose from a list the type of career they would like to pursue in the future. This question was used only to further increase identification with the scenario. Then, we asked them to carefully read the following scenario, trying to imagine themselves in the same situation:

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*Now imagine that you have sent your CV to a company that you really like in your favorite working field to carry out an internship. Imagine that the company, after evaluating your CV, invites you to an interview.*

Participants were then asked to reply to some related questions regarding the negotiation behavioral intentions variables. Please notice that, beyond the wage negotiation variables, we also asked two questions related to self-perceived hireability and anticipated productivity that are not considered here (see the supplemental materials for details and results). Afterwards, participants responded to a suspicion probe and completed demographic questions, including a measure of work/academic self-esteem (2 items; e.g., “Very often, I feel insecure about my academic or professional competencies” reversed; responses were gathered on a scale from 1 = “very disagree” to 7 = “very agree”). Finally, participants read a full debriefing revealing the true aim of the study and were asked to provide a final informed consent to use their data for scientific purposes. The present experimental protocol was approved by the ethical committee of the authors’ University (n° 3412).

### Measures

**Sexualized media consumption.** To create a measure of exposure to sexualized media we followed two steps. First, we asked a group of 10 young Italian Psychology students within the same target age as the final sample to list TV programs and social media celebrities (both women and men) that are famous among young people and often show sexualized content. They also listed famous TV programs that usually did not involve sexualization. In the second step, 19 women rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Very often*) how much the listed TV programs portray sexualized content (i.e., women scantily dressed and/or in sensual poses and behaviors that emphasize their bodies), and how much the listed celebrities portray themselves or others in a sexualized way on social media. The sample was recruited using the same strategy as the main study to have a similar

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demographic distribution (majority of heterosexuals (90%) and university students (68%); age  $M_{age} = 24.47$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.06$ ). The final list of sexualized media used in this study included 10 TV programs and 11 female celebrities that were rated equal to or above the mid-point of the scale (= 3); the remaining TV programs ( $n = 4$ ) and male influencers ( $n = 6$ ) were used as filler items (see the supplemental materials for the complete lists). We focused on TV because it is still the most popular traditional media and TV programs are also consumed on streaming (Statista, 2023). In fact, the TV programs listed were among the most popular TV programs in Italy. Social media, on the other hand, are the most popular media platforms (Global Web Index, 2019). As discussed in the introduction, both types of media often showcase female sexualization and both have been shown to increase women's chronic self-objectification, even though online media use is linked to stronger effects than TV use (Karsay et al., 2018).

In the present study, we asked participants to indicate how often they had watched each of the 14 Italian TV programs during the last year. As explained above, 10 TV programs (e.g., "Avanti un altro!") often portray women in sexualized ways and relegate them to marginal and mostly decorative roles. Then, we asked participants to indicate how often they viewed social media content of the 17 celebrities/influencers in the list; 11 were names of famous women that often show sexualized and idealized images of themselves in their socials (e.g., Elettra Lamborghini; Nicky Minaj). For both kinds of questions, participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Very often*). We created an overall index of sexualized media consumption by averaging the responses to the 10 sexualized TV programs and 11 female social media celebrities/influencers, so that the higher the index, the higher the sexualized media consumption.

**Internalization of beauty ideals.** Participants completed the Internalization-General subscale of SATAQ-3 (Thompson et al., 2004) in its validated Italian version (Stefanile et al.,



2011). SATAQ-3 is a self-report questionnaire used to measure awareness and internalization of sociocultural beauty ideals. In this study, we used the 9-item Internalization-General subscale that measures one's level of internalization of general beauty ideals (e.g., "I would like my body to look like people in magazines and social media"<sup>3</sup>). Participants' responses were measured on a Likert scale from 1 = *Definitely disagree* to 5 = *Definitely agree*. Average responses were used ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Chronic self-objectification.** Participants completed the Self Objectification Beliefs and Behaviors Scale (SOBBS; Lindner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2017), a 14-item self-report questionnaire translated into Italian by the authors, measuring chronic self-objectification. The scale has been validated in the US on samples of young women (age range 18-30 years old) and has shown excellent psychometric properties (Lindner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2017). The questionnaire is composed of two factors (7-items each) that represent the two core dimensions of the construct, as conceptualized by the authors: (1) thinking about the body as an outside observer (e.g., "I often think about how my body must look to others"); (2) treating the body as representing the whole self, valuing more its appearance than its abilities (e.g., "Looking attractive to others is more important to me than being happy with who I am inside"; Lindner & Tantleff-Dunn, 2017). Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). We calculated an index of self-objectification by averaging the 14 items ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality.** Participants were invited to rate the extent to which a series of traits described themselves in their study/work field on a scale from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Very much*. Four traits represented the dimension of competence ("competent", "capable", "intelligent"; "independent"; Heflick et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2017), six traits corresponded to the dimension of agency ("capable of

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<sup>3</sup> We adapted a few items to include social media together with printed media.

planning”, “capable of self-control”, “capable of thinking”, “capable of communicating”, “capable of memorizing”, “capable to act morally”; Gray et al., 2011), and three items measured morality (“trustworthy”, “sincere”, “honest”; Leach et al., 2007). We calculated average scores of competence ( $\alpha = .74$ ), agency ( $\alpha = .67$ ), and morality ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

### **Negotiation behavioral intentions.**

***Salary proposal.*** After reading the working scenario and responding to a preliminary question about hireability (see supplemental materials for details and results), participants read: “*Now imagine that the company, after a careful evaluation, has selected you. You are going to start next month! The HR manager has reached out to inform you about an appointment scheduled for tomorrow to sign the contract. They also let you know that the internship is remunerated, and they are willing to hear your salary proposal*”.<sup>4</sup> Then, we asked participants to indicate how much they would request as a monthly salary, taking into account that the average national salary for internships ranges from € 300 to € 800. Responses were measured on a slider ranging from € 300 to €800, with €1 as the increment unit.

***Negotiation probability.*** Afterward, we invited the participants to imagine that the HR manager made a counteroffer amounting to half of their salary proposal. Then, participants indicated how likely they were to try to negotiate after that counteroffer. Responses were measured on a slider ranging from 0 = “0% likely” to 100 = “100% likely”.

***Salary raise negotiation.*** Participants were then invited to indicate how much more money they would ask for after the counteroffer. Responses were taken on a slider ranging from €0 to €400, with € 1 as the increment unit. Participants who responded 0% likely to the previous question (i.e., they were not willing to negotiate) were asked to put the slider on €0.

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<sup>4</sup> In line with recommendations by Kugler et al. (2018), we made it clear that the HR manager wanted to start a negotiation, which helped us to reduce the ambiguity regarding the appropriateness of negotiating.

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A proportion was calculated between the counteroffer proposed by the HR and participants' salary raise proposal, so that a positive index indicates that participants asked more than initially requested as a salary (expressed in percentage). Negative scores indicate that they proposed a salary raise lower than the initial salary request (participants with a score of -100% did not bargain).

### Results

#### Preliminary analyses

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and correlations. All correlations among our variables were in the expected direction.

Before testing the path models, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the validity of the original structures of our 5 psychological measures (Brown & Moore, 2012), namely internalization of beauty ideals (9 items), self-objectification (14 items), competence (4 items), agency (6 items), and morality (3 items). The model was estimated using maximum likelihood estimation on the Jamovi software. Adequacy of fit was assessed using criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), namely a combination of at least two indexes meeting the following criteria: comparative fit index (CFI) > 0.95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.06, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) < 0.08. The model allowing some within-factor items to share residual covariances showed an adequate fit  $\chi^2(561) = 1113, p < .001, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.05$ , supporting the original factor structure of the scales. Items' factor loadings were all significant ( $p < .001$ ) and ranged as follows: 1.18 - 0.63 for the internalization of beauty ideals scale; 1.06 - 0.21 for the self-objectification scale; 0.54 - 0.46 for the competence scale; 0.61 - 0.42 for the agency scale; 0.58 - 0.42 for the morality scale. Moreover, Variance Inflation Factors showed no multicollinearity problems among the variables (max VIF = 1.97).

### **Path analyses**

To test the proposed model shown in Figure 1, we performed path analyses separately for each negotiation behavioral intention and considering single observed scores for each predictor with the Lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) of the R software. Sexualized media consumption, internalization of beauty ideals and self-objectification were entered as sequential predictors of competence, agency, and morality, which were tested as parallel predictors on each job-related outcome model. Competence, agency, and morality were allowed to covary. Importantly, we examined the hypothesized indirect paths from sexualized media to each job-related outcome via either competence, agency, or morality by estimating bootstrapped standard errors and bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals with 5000 samples (Cheung & Lau, 2008). As for the CFA, we evaluated the overall goodness of fit of the models considering the following criteria: CFI > 0.95, RMSEA < 0.06, and SRMR < 0.08. We also considered the  $R^2$  of each path and the Total Coefficient of Determination (TCD; Bollen, 1989, Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996) of the overall model. Below, we report the results separately by outcome variables. Please notice that, although the models' fit decreased, the pattern of results reported below remained unchanged when the following variables were included as separate covariates in the path analyses: participants' average daily media usage, academic/working self-esteem, SES, and age.

### ***Salary proposal***

The salary proposal's path model showed a good fit  $\chi^2(10) = 24.97, p = .005$ , CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05, SMSR = 0.03. As shown in Figure 2, in line with the hypothesized model, higher sexualized media consumption predicted greater internalization of beauty ideals, which was associated with higher levels of self-objectification. Moreover, self-objectification was negatively linked to self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality. Higher self-attribution of competence was associated with higher salary proposal

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scores, whereas agency and morality were not significant predictors. Crucially, sexualized media consumption exerted a significant negative indirect effect on salary proposal via self-attribution of competence ( $b = -1.52$ ,  $SE = 0.58$ ) because the bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals did not include the zero (95% CI [-2.97, -0.63]). On the contrary, the indirect paths via agency ( $b = -0.58$ ,  $SE = 0.50$ ; 95% CI [-1.79, 0.27]) and morality ( $b = -0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.44$ ; 95% CI [-.96, .81]) were not significant. Therefore, higher sexualized media consumption predicted participants' internalization of beauty ideals, which was linked with increased self-objectification. Such higher self-objectification was associated with lower self-attribution of competence, which predicted participants' lower salary requests. The total coefficient of determination (TCD) for the overall model was .08, which corresponds to  $r = .28$ , indicating a small to intermediate effect.

Please notice that the pattern of results remained unchanged when conducting the path analysis separately for sexualized TV programs and social media consumption as predictors. Notably, the TCD of the TV programs model was significantly smaller,  $r = .12$ , just above the no-effect area, whereas the social media model accounted for an intermediate effect ( $r = .32$ ).

### ***Negotiation probability***

The path model on negotiation probability showed a good fit  $\chi^2(10) = 27.93$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $CFI = 0.97$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $SMSR = 0.03$ . As shown in Figure 3, the path results were very similar to the salary proposal results, except that self-attribution of morality emerged as a significant predictor of negotiation probability together with self-attribution of competence. Importantly, sexualized media consumption also had a significant negative indirect link with participants' negotiation probability both via competence ( $b = -0.41$ ,  $SE = .17$ ; 95% CI [-.87, -.16]) and morality ( $b = -0.22$ ,  $SE = .13$ ; 95% CI [-0.54, -.02]). On the contrary, the indirect path via agency ( $b = 0.001$ ,  $SE = .15$ ; 95% CI [-0.29, .33]) was not significant. Therefore,

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higher sexualized media consumption was indirectly associated with participants' lower negotiation probability via a chain of relations that linked higher internalization of beauty ideals, higher self-objectification, and lower self-attribution of competence and morality. The total coefficient of determination (TCD) for the overall model was .08, which corresponds to  $r = .28$ , indicating a small to intermediate effect.

As for the salary proposal, the pattern of results remained unchanged when conducting the path analysis separately for sexualized TV programs and social media consumption as predictors, but the effect size that the TV programs model accounted for was significantly smaller,  $r = .12$ , just above the no-effect area, whereas the social media model effect size fell in the intermediate area ( $r = .32$ ).

### ***Salary raise negotiation***

Finally, the path model for the salary raise negotiation showed a good fit  $\chi^2(10) = 26.18, p = .004, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05, SMSR = 0.03$ . The path results for the salary raise negotiation were the same as the salary proposal results (see Figure 4). Importantly, paralleling previous results, sexualized media consumption had a significant negative indirect link with salary raise negotiation via competence ( $b = -0.37, SE = .15; 95\% CI [-0.77, -0.15]$ ). On the contrary, bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effects through agency ( $b = 0.17, SE = .14; 95\% CI [-0.05, 0.51]$ ) and morality ( $b = -0.11, SE = .11; 95\% CI [-0.35, 0.08]$ ) included the zero, showing that the processes via agency and morality were not significant. Therefore, in line with previous results, higher sexualized media consumption was indirectly linked with participants' lower salary raise negotiation via higher internalization of beauty ideals, higher self-objectification, and lower self-attribution of competence. The total coefficient of determination (TCD) for the overall model was .08, which corresponds to  $r = .28$ , indicating a small to intermediate effect. As for salary proposal, and salary negotiation probability, the pattern of results remained unchanged

when conducting the path analysis separately for sexualized TV programs and social media consumption as predictors, but the effect sizes were significantly different (TV programs model,  $r = .12$ ; social media model,  $r = .32$ ).

### **Alternate models**

We also tested alternate models in which the positions of self-objectification and self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality were reversed, while the rest of the models' specifications remained the same as the predicted model. These models were run because one could argue that, given the correlational nature of our study and the strong theoretical relation between self-objectification and self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality, the order in which they may occur could be reversed. The fit for this model was not acceptable for any of the outcome variables, for example on salary proposal  $\chi^2(10) = 263.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .60, RMSEA = .21, SRMR = .13, although the main negative indirect relation between sexualized media consumption and the negotiation intention variables via competence were supported. Moreover, the alternate models' Akaike Information Criteria were higher ( $AIC_{\text{salary proposal}} = 12239.357$ ) compared to our predicted model ( $AIC_{\text{salary proposal}} = 12000.930$ ), suggesting that our predicted model was better fitted to the data than the alternate models (see <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/KUWFP> for the other alternate models' results). However, given the correlational nature of our study, the overall results should be taken with caution.

In addition, we tested the same predicted models on the subsample of university students ( $n = 360$ ), because the employee subsample ( $n = 162$ ) may have somewhat skewed the results, given that the working scenario referred to an internship position. The pattern of results remained identical.

### **Discussion**

In the present correlational study, we investigated whether everyday sexualized media consumption may initiate a process that negatively impacts women's salary negotiation

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intentions. Overall, our results supported the path model: negative indirect links between sexualized media consumption with each of our negotiation behavioral intentions emerged via the reduction of self-perceived competence. Specifically, women's higher sexualized media use was linked to higher internalization of beauty ideals (supporting *hypothesis 1a*), which in turn was associated with higher chronic self-objectification (supporting *hypothesis 1b*); such higher self-objectification was linked to lower self-attribution of competence, which in turn was connected to lower women's salary proposal, negotiation probability, and salary raise negotiation after a counteroffer in a working scenario. The same path emerged from sexualized media use to negotiation probability via morality, so that a lower sense of morality was associated with lower women's negotiation probability (*RQ1*).

On the contrary, self-attribution of agency did not predict any of the negotiation behavioral intentions. This result seems at odds with previous literature showing a link between self-attribution of agency and higher wages (e.g., Abele, 2003). To our knowledge, the present study was the first to assess self-attribution of competence, agency, and morality as competing predictors of negotiation performances; thus, we can only speculate about the reasons behind the null findings. One possibility is that competence may be stereotypically perceived as the most important requirement for success in work settings as it is also the dimension that dominates self-perception (Wojciszke, 2005), which would explain why in the present study it emerged as the main driving force over the other dimensions. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to corroborate the overall pattern of results and address other potential explanations.

Results from our model substantially extend previous literature in several ways. First, they corroborate and extend the literature on sexualized media use on chronic self-objectification (e.g., Karsay et al., 2018; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2012; Ward, 2016). They suggest that this process has negative connections with variables that have never been



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addressed so far, such as women's self-perception of competence, agency, and morality (supporting *hypothesis 2*). At the same time, they also support and extend recent theorizing around self-dehumanization (Loughnan et al. 2017; Pecini et al., 2023). Our data suggest that especially women with greater internalization of media ideals and of the observer's perspective on their bodies (self-objectification) may end up internalizing also the observer's judgments, self-attributing less competence, agency, and morality; this could be the result of a chronic process related to sexualized media consumption other than situational sexually objectifying interactions shown by previous research (Loughnan et al., 2017; Baldissarri et al., 2019).

Second, these results also extend the overall objectification theory literature (Roberts et al., 2018; Moradi & Huang, 2008 for reviews) by showing a novel negative ramification of the theory on women's negotiation behaviors in work settings. Relatedly, our findings may have implications for the understanding of gender differences in negotiation skills (see Kugler et al., 2018 for a meta-analysis). In fact, we speculate that chronic self-objectification's detrimental effects may be specifically related to women's negotiations because women, more than men, are the target of sexual objectification in their daily life and are affected by self-objectifying processes (e.g., Holland et al., 2017). Thus, our results suggest that among other factors (e.g., women's underrepresentation in STEM fields, Daniels & Robnett, 2021), media-driven chronic self-objectification and devaluation of self-competence and morality may lead women themselves to underestimate their potential salary value and hinder their negotiation intentions, thus reinforcing the gender pay gap (e.g., Kugler et al., 2018; Mazie et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it remains to be studied whether men's chronic self-objectification would also predict lower negotiation performance.

Overall, it is important to notice that the models showed small to intermediate overall effect sizes, attesting that, although not negligible, the indirect effects are relatively modest.

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In fact, both self-objectification and salary negotiation are complex phenomena, and many different predictors and individual differences are involved. Notably, the pattern of results remained unchanged when controlling for demographics such as socioeconomic status, age, academic/working self-esteem, and overall media usage. This latter finding is particularly interesting as it suggests that the effects are specifically driven by the sexualized nature of the media content and not by mere usage of all media content, a result in line with Meier and Gray (2014) and with sexualized media theories such as the 3AM model (Wright, 2011; see also Karsay et al., 2018 for a discussion). Interestingly, when analyzed separately, the effect of TV programs was much smaller than that of social media and almost null, while the social media model had a moderate effect. This result confirms the importance of social media as highlighted also by Karsay et al. (2018).

Our findings also relate to that of Blake et al. (2018) who found a positive association between economic inequality and female self-sexualization on social media, concluding that self-sexualization could be a strategy toward economic climbing. However, we speculate that this strategy could be counterproductive leading women to undervalue themselves and reinforcing, in a vicious cycle, the gender pay gap and self-sexualization itself.

Therefore, it is particularly important to work on intervention and prevention strategies designed to promote critical media consumption by raising viewers' awareness of sexualizing practices in the media and their consequences. Such strategies can protect women from body image concerns (McLean et al., 2016 for a review) and increase their collective action (Guizzo et al., 2017). Another possible effective strategy would be to educate women about the detrimental effects of self-objectification as well as on strategies to resist its effects (Tylka & Augustus-Horwath, 2011). Programs that aim to empower women by increasing their bargaining power and securing higher salaries could be also a strategy to pursue (Azong et al., 2017).

### **Limitations**

The present research has several limitations. The first and most evident is related to its correlational nature. Although the use of path analyses, the strong objectification theoretical framework, and the test for alternate models help us gain some confidence about the pattern of the relations, nevertheless addressing multiple mediators in correlational studies is always problematic and causality cannot be inferred (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008). Therefore, further laboratory research should be conducted using randomized experimental designs. For example, exposure to sexualized media could be manipulated to ascertain whether the manipulation affects subsequent self-judgments and, as a consequence, negotiation behaviors, possibly involving a more realistic job scenario. As noted above, acute exposure to sexualized media might not be sufficient to impact salary bargaining but the effects might be mediated by self-perception of competence and morality. Furthermore, our methodology presents a potential issue with demand characteristics bias as, despite precautions (i.e., detailed cover story, filler scales) approximately 19% of participants indicated general awareness of the true purpose of the study. Future research should further improve strategies to control this bias or find alternative measures. Similarly, the ordering effect might have influenced our results. Participants might have been primed by initial measures (i.e., sexualized media consumption) to think about sexually objectifying experiences, influencing their responses to the following measures. Thus, the line between chronic and situational media effects might be difficult to disentangle in the present study. Future studies interested in chronic effects should control order effects by counterbalancing the measures in the study.

In addition, in the present study, we did not assess participants' negotiation self-efficacy, which is an important predictor of negotiators' performance (Miles & LaSalle, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2006). Future studies might include this individual difference as a predictor in the models. Moreover, participants' previous paid job experience might have

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influenced their salary negotiation. Nonetheless the pattern of results did not vary between the students' and the employees' sub-samples, enhancing our confidence that the scenario (paid internship) and employment status did not impact women's responses.

Another constraint regards the measure of sexualized media consumption we employed, which is limited to tv programs and social media celebrities suggested by a small sample of Italian students. As a potential consequence, participants' sexualized media consumption was low, which is another aspect that warrants further consideration. Thus, the measure may greatly underestimate Italian women's actual amount of sexualized media exposure and its link with subsequent variables. Future research might include other media formats (e.g., music videos, video games) to better reflect participants' actual sexualized media diet and consequent effects. Furthermore, sexualized media contribute to the spread of gender role stereotypes as these views are often inextricably intertwined (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). Nevertheless, our results suggest that negotiation intentions were predicted by chronic self-objectification, providing evidence that specific sexual objectification processes might be implicated even if broader gender role stereotypes might also be at play.

Moreover, our study focused on habitual sexualized media consumption, without considering the impact of other sexual objectification experiences (e.g., past interpersonal experiences; Loughnan et al., 2017). However, according to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) there is no reason to think that our model could not apply also to these situations, a speculation that requires, of course, further research. Finally, our sample comprised mostly white, middle-class participants, thus preventing us from generalizing our results to other ethnic and socioeconomic status groups.

### **Conclusion**

Our study represents a first step toward understanding potential relations between women's media-driven chronic self-objectification and negotiation performance. Notably,

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this study provides us with a preliminary insight into such relations, as a negative indirect link has been found between women's sexualized media consumption and their negotiation performance in work settings. Such a link may unfold through worrisome relations with women's habitual self-objectification and reduced sense of competence and morality that require our attention, as they may contribute to reinforcing gender economic inequalities and, specifically, the gender pay gap.

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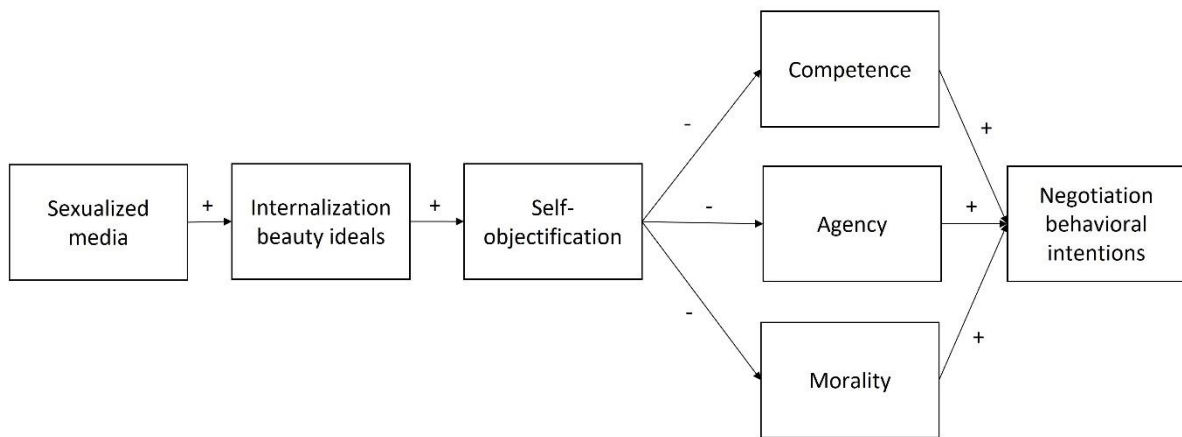
Table 1

Means, (Standard Deviations), Minimum-Maximum Values, and Pearson's correlations among the main variables.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Min-max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sexualized media	1.54 (0.43)	1.00-3.71	-								
2. Internalization	2.75 (1.04)	1.00-5.00	.28**	-							
3. Self-objectification	2.44 (0.72)	1.00-4.64	.28**	.59**	-						
4. Competence	3.70 (0.60)	1.00-5.00	-.004	-.13**	-.18*	-					
5. Agency	3.86 (0.57)	1.33-5.00	.01	-.13**	-.21**	.52**	-				
6. Morality	4.27 (0.63)	1.33-5.00	.02	-.16**	-.20**	.28**	.41**	-			
7. Salary proposal	618.59 (111.45)	300-800	-.01	-.06	-.12**	.23**	.17**	.09*	-		
8. Negotiation probability	59.74 (33.30)	0-100	.08	-.04	-.09*	.20**	.13**	.14**	.26**	-	
9. Salary raise negotiation	- 49.3% (27.67)	-100-60	-.01	-.01	-.09*	.17**	.04	.07	.12**	.62**	-

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ ;  $N = 552$ ; Internalization = Internalization of beauty ideals

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*Figure 1. Proposed indirect path model*

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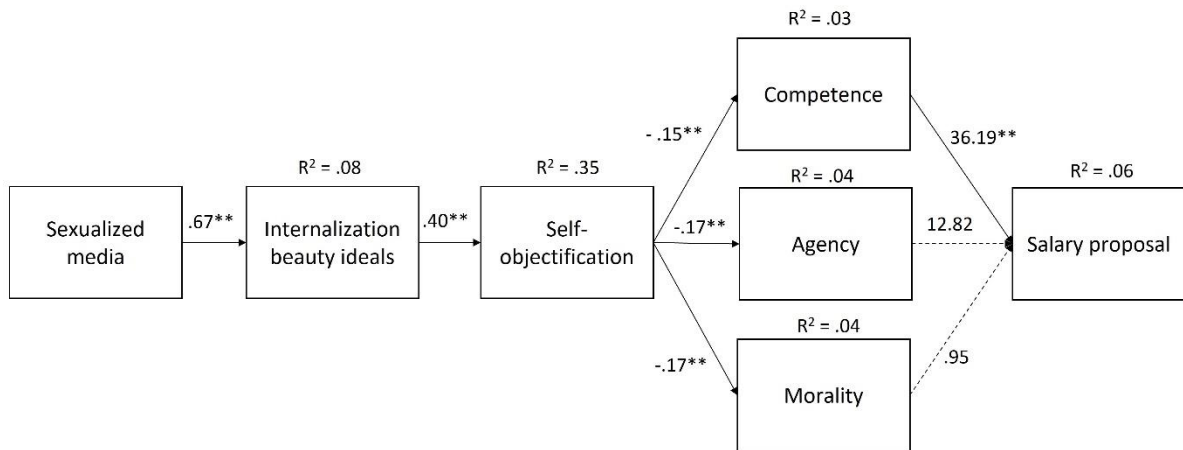


Figure 2. Path model for salary proposal.

Note: Values represent unstandardized coefficients (b); dashed lines represent non-significant paths; solid lines represent significant paths; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .

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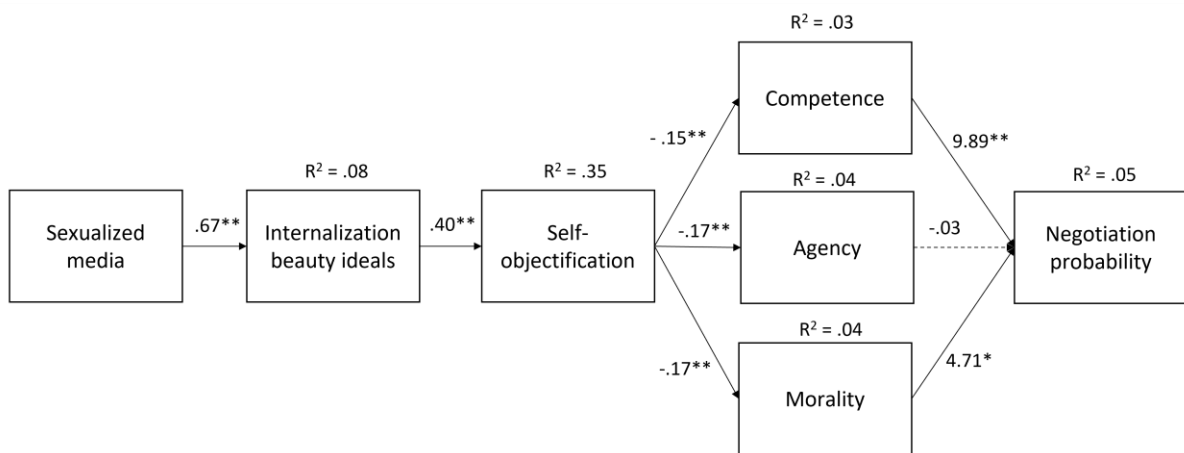


Figure 3. Path model for negotiation probability.

Note: Values represent unstandardized coefficients (b); dashed lines represent non-significant paths; solid lines represent significant paths; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .

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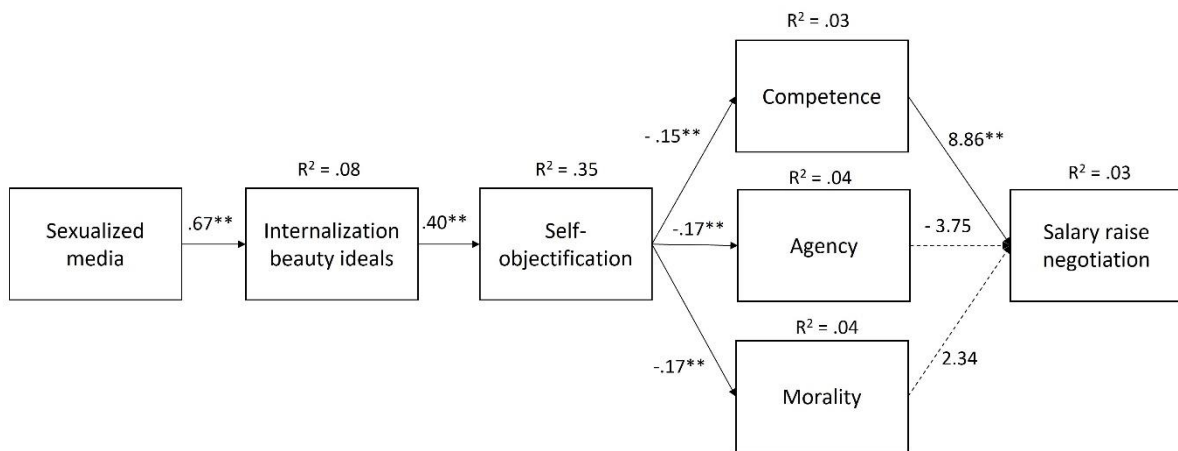


Figure 4. Path model for salary raise negotiation.

Note: Values represent unstandardized coefficients (b); dashed lines represent non-significant paths; solid lines represent significant paths; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .