



# Women and #MeToo in Italy: Internalized sexualization is associated with tolerance of sexual harassment and negative views of the #MeToo movement

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## Abstract

As a consequence of exposure to sexualized messages, girls and women may internalize the belief that sexual attractiveness to men is an important aspect of their identity. Whereas research on internalized sexualization has mainly focused on its consequences for girls' well-being and academic outcomes, the present study ( $N=222$ , women, aged 20 to 29) examined whether internalized sexualization is related to sexist attitudes and tolerance of sexual harassment among young women. It also analyzed internalized sexualization' links to women's views of notorious sexual abuse allegations in the so-called Weinstein scandal and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement, a campaign aimed at combatting sexual harassment and sexual assault. The study was conducted in Italy, a context characterized by pervasive sexualized messages and diffuse criticism against the #MeToo movement. The findings showed that internalized sexualization was associated with stronger endorsement of sexist attitudes and higher acceptance of sexual harassment myths, which worked as sequential mediators of skepticism towards sexual abuse allegations in the Weinstein scandals. Endorsement of sexist attitudes mediated the relation between internalized sexualization and negative attitudes towards the #MeToo movement. This study extends the knowledge on the correlates of sexualization, suggesting that women's internalization of the belief that they should be sexually attractive to men might contribute to reinforce ideologies and attitudes that perpetrate women's mistreatment while diminishing support for social activism on women's behalf.

**Keywords** Internalized sexualization · #MeToo movement · Sexist attitudes · Sexual harassment

## Introduction

Two cultural trends related to women's efforts to achieve gender equality have characterized the start of the twenty-first century in many Western countries: one retrogressive and one progressive. The retrogressive movement concerns the widespread sexualization of girls and women. Children and adolescents in most contemporary Western societies are exposed to myriad messages that sexualize and objectify women and girls through media programs, musical videos, advertisements, magazines, and cartoons (e.g., Pacilli, Tomasetto, & Cadinu, 2016; Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Exposure to such messages appears to lead some women and girls to believe

that being sexually appealing to men is a core component of the feminine gender role and their own identities (APA, 2007; Bigler, Tomasetto, & McKenney, 2019) and, in turn, is associated with a host of negative consequences (Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013).

The progressive trend concerns efforts to recognize and combat sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse. After decades of failure to acknowledge these problems, some progress has been made, including efforts of U.S. college campuses to use Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 to address sexual violence. Similarly, Italy recently passed the "Codice Rosso" (*Red Code*) law, which aims to reinforce the protection of the victims of sexual and domestic violence (Legge 19 luglio 2019, n. 69). Also illustrative of this progress is the broad and pervasive #MeToo movement, born as a social media campaign with the explicit goal of providing support to victims of sexual harassment. Indeed, the #MeToo hashtag, which spread worldwide as a reaction to notorious allegations of sexual misconduct in the show-business industry (the so-called Weinstein scandal broken out in October 2017), has been used by millions of people in at least eighty-

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five countries, including Middle East and Arab countries (MeToo Rising, 2019).

The research question of primary interest in this paper is whether, and if so, how, these two topics at the nexus of contemporary gender roles and sexuality are related. Specifically, we analyzed whether the tendency of women to believe that being sexually attractive to men is core component of the female gender role is associated with the endorsement of sexist views and undermines women's willingness to hold male perpetrators of sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse accountable for their actions while feeding their blaming of female victims for their maltreatment. We also tested whether internalized sexualization is associated with women's skepticism concerning notorious allegations of sexual misconduct made by celebrities involved in the Weinstein scandal as well as to negative attitudes towards the #MeToo movement.

We examined these questions within a particular context: young Italian women's views of the #MeToo movement. The Italian context is interesting because it is characterized by pervasive sexualized messages (Giomi, 2010; Valtorta, Sacino, Baldissarri, & Volpato, 2016) and relatively little discussion about the #MeToo movement (Horowitz, 2017; Siri, 2017). The #MeToo movement – as well as its local counterpart named #QuellaVoltaChe (literally, #ThatTimeWhen; Powell, 2017) – has been seen as inextricably related to the abuse allegations against powerful men in the show-business rather than as a campaign in support of all victims of sexual abuse. Moreover, the public debate on this issue in Italy included numerous tepid and even adversarial positions (Farina, 2017; Nadotti, 2018), and the few public figures who expressed their support for the movement were attacked (Farina, 2017; Horowitz, 2017).

### Internalized Sexualization among Women

The notion that women habitually want and seek male sexual attention is a component of the sexualization of women. The construct also includes the valuing of women exclusively for their sexual appeal, the treatment of women as an object for one's sexual pleasure, and the inappropriate imposition of sexuality onto women (APA, 2007). Given the prevalence of both women's sexual objectification in media – which implies the representation of a woman as a mere body/object for men's sexual desires (Fasoli, Durante, Mari, Zogmaister, & Volpato, 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) – and women's interpersonal experience in Western countries (e.g., Guizzo, Cadinu, Galdi, Maass, & Latrofa, 2017; Ward, 2016), it is perhaps unsurprising that some girls and women show evidence of personally endorsing the belief that sexual attractiveness to men is a core component of the female gender role and their identity (McKenney & Bigler, 2016a, 2016b). The idea that girls and women internalize sexualized messages is in line with cognitive, constructivist accounts of gender role

development, according to which children construct cognitive representations or gender roles by observing the characteristics and behaviors that are regarded as appropriate for women and men within the culture (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009; Brown, 2019; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). These schemas guide individuals' self-views and behaviors, such that women and men engage in actions that are deemed as appropriate for their own gender while avoiding inappropriate actions (Bandura, 1999; Bigler et al., 2019). For instance, girls might imitate sexualized behaviors to be liked and accepted by peers, as from elementary school they perceive that sexualized girls are more popular than non-sexualized girls (Jongenelis, Pettigrew, Byrne, & Biagioni, 2016; Starr & Ferguson, 2012).

To capture individual differences in internalized sexualization among girls, McKenney and Bigler (2016a, 2016b) focused on different activities and beliefs that indicate the endorsement of sexualized cognitive representations of feminine roles in adolescence (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006). Specifically, they operationalized internalized sexualization in terms of a) girls' preferences for sexualized media programs and b) for sexualized clothing items; c) time spent talking about sexualized activities with friends; d) endorsement of sexualized beliefs about their own and other women's bodies; e) beliefs that one's appearance should be sexually appealing to men even at a cost to one's own values or desires; f) beliefs that being sexually attractive gives them power.

Research has shown that internalized sexualization affects psychosocial adjustment among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls (Bigler et al., 2019). Adolescent girls with higher levels of internalized sexualization earned lower grades at school and lower standardized state achievement scores than their peers, a finding attributed to girls' lower levels of investment of cognitive resources and time in academic pursuits (McKenney & Bigler, 2016b; see also Pacilli et al., 2016). Moreover, McKenney and Bigler (2016a) found that internalized sexualization was related to increased body surveillance and body shame, which, in turn, is known to trigger dysfunctional eating behaviors (Dakanalis et al., 2015; Jongenelis et al., 2016). Other evidence comes from research on self-objectification, which represents the internalization of a cultural perspective on the self whereby the body is valued mainly for its appearance and is an object of pleasure and play for others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Ward, Seabrook, Grower, Giaccardi, & Lippman, 2018). Studies revealed that girls and women who construct objectified self-images show higher body image dissatisfaction (Jones & Griffiths, 2015; Tatangelo, McCabe, Mellor, & Mealey, 2016) and drive for thinness (Register, Katreovich, Aruguete, & Edman, 2015) than their peers who do not self-objectify. Moreover, self-objectification is associated with lower well-being and self-worth (Impett, Henson, Breines, Schooler, & Tolman, 2011) and higher anxiety and depression (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007).

## Internalized Sexualization, Sexist Attitudes, and Views of Sexual Harassment

Besides influencing women's mental health and well-being, internalized sexualization is likely to be positively related to sexist attitudes. This assumption can be rooted in research on sexual objectification, showing that the exposure to sexualized media and objectified representations of women leads to higher acceptance of gender role stereotypes and sexist attitudes (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Ward, 2016). For instance, playing sexy video games is associated with benevolent sexism (Stermer & Burkley, 2015), a component of ambivalent sexism that includes the idealization of traditional women's roles and men's dependency on women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Moreover, self-objectification leads to lower support for feminism (MacKay & Covell, 1997), enhances women's tendency to accept the status quo, and limits women's engagement in gender-based social activism on their own behalf (Calogero, 2013; Calogero & Jost, 2011).

Convergent evidence also comes from studies on the "beauty ideals are oppressive" (BIO) hypothesis. According to the BIO hypothesis, cultural beauty ideals and practices (e.g., thin ideals or cosmetic use) represent a form of oppression of women in a male-dominated society, as they shift the attention from women's competencies to their appearance and sex appeal and are a source of body scrutiny and body dissatisfaction (Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007). Indeed, Forbes et al. (2007) and Swami et al. (2010) reported that the endorsement of various beauty ideals and practices was associated with sexist beliefs towards women and heightened objectification of others.

Past work has also highlighted positive associations between women's sexual objectification and tolerance of sexual harassment (Bernard, Ledrand, & Klein, 2016; Milburn, Mather, & Conrad, 2000; Read, Lynch, & Matthews, 2018). People exposed to sexualized images of women attribute more blame and responsibility to rape victims (Bernard et al., 2016; Burgess & Burpo, 2012; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Ward, 2016). Adolescent boys and girls expressed more tolerance of rape myths and sexual harassment after playing a video game with a sexualized vs. non sexualized female character (Driesmans, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2015), and men were more likely to aggress against a woman who rejected them in a dating game when the woman wore sexualized vs. non-sexualized clothing (Blake, Hopkins, Sprunger, Eckhardt, & Denson, 2017). A sexualized appearance might also lead to the withdrawal of help to women who underwent violence (Pacilli et al., 2017) or sexual harassment in the workplace (Gramazio, Cadinu, Pagliaro, & Pacilli, 2018); even among children, sexualization reduces peers' attribution of morality to a same-age female victim of bullying and their intentions to help her (Pacilli, Spaccatini, Barresi, & Tomasetto, 2019).

Whereas most research has focused on the consequences of exposure to sexualized representations of women, there is little evidence on the associations between self-representation in a sexualized fashion and one's view of sexual harassment among women themselves. Fox, Ralston, Cooper, and Jones (2015) found that women who self-objectified due to exposure to sexualized avatars showed greater endorsement of rape myths than women exposed to non-sexualized avatars. Moreover, trait self-objectification was found to predict tolerance toward sexual harassment and more negative attitudes towards harassed victims in both men and women (Bernard et al., 2016). Accordingly, one might expect internalized sexualization levels to be related to more lenient views of sexual harassment and higher skepticism about allegations of sexual misconduct made through the #MeToo movement.

## Contemporary View of Sexual Harassment: The #MeToo Movement

As mentioned, even though the #MeToo movement was founded in 2006 by the social activist Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence, its international renown has risen dramatically from October 2017, following the New York Times' coverage of allegations against the U.S. film producer Harvey Weinstein. After several women accused Weinstein of sexually harassing, assaulting, or raping them, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted: "If you have been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet", inviting women to reveal their experiences of sexual harassment or assault so that they could "give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" and support its victims. Within a few hours, the hashtag #MeToo spread across the web, giving rise to a worldwide movement and revealing the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault experiences for famous as well as for ordinary women (and men) in various contexts and industries (CBS, 2017; Frye, 2018).

Although widely praised, the #MeToo movement has also been criticized for feeding calumny and androphobia and for failing to distinguish between different degrees of sexual misconduct (After a year of #MeToo, 2018; De Benedictis, Orgad, & Rottenberg, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018; North, 2018). Notably, in a letter to the French magazine *Le Monde*, a group of more than one hundred women – including actresses, journalists, academics, and doctors – accused the movement of being dangerous for relationships between men and women and claimed the right of "defending the freedom to annoy, which is essential to sexual freedom" (Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, 2018). In Italy, journalists and politicians have overtly questioned the innocence of women who accused powerful men of sexual misconduct. For instance, an Italian right-wing newspaper headline read: "First they put out, then whine and pretend to regret it" (Farina, 2017). As in other countries, criticisms have often

concerned, directly or indirectly, the notion that women who reported sexual misconduct, harassment, or abuse through the #MeToo movement wanted and sought male sexual attention (Horowitz, 2017; Sciandivasci, 2018).

Critics have also questioned the temporal gap between the alleged abuses and the victims' allegations (Farina, 2017). In this respect, Lucarini et al. (2020) found that individuals (especially those high in ambivalent sexism) evaluated more negatively women who reported sexual harassment after a delay rather than immediately, possibly because temporal distance makes people perceive the event more abstractly and rely more on the endorsed stereotypes (McCrea, Wieber, & Myers, 2012).

Notably, a recent study of Maes, Schreurs, van Oosten, and Vandenbosch (2019) with a sample of Flemish adolescents showed that exposure to sexually explicit content was positively associated with resistance towards the #MeToo movement. Namely, more frequent viewing of sexually explicit content predicted negative views of women who shared their sexual assault experiences via #MeToo, and these associations were mediated by sex objectification of women. Therefore, these findings are in line with the present study's assumption that internalized sexualization would be accompanied by a less favorable view of the #MeToo movement.

## The Present Study

The present research examined whether internalized sexualization in young women is associated with sexist attitudes and tolerance of sexual harassment. It also analyzed the associations among internalized sexualization, skepticism towards sexual-abuse allegations in the Weinstein scandal, and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement and tested whether sexist attitudes and sexual harassment myths acceptance mediated these associations.

Building on McKenney and Bigler's (2016a, 2016b) conceptualization, internalized sexualization was investigated in terms of women's preference for sexualized media programs, beliefs about women's bodies and the power arising from sexiness, and enjoyment of sexualized male attention (see Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011). Women's sexist attitudes were assessed through the Attitudes Towards Women measure (AWS; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973; Swim & Cohen, 1997), which implies overt support for traditional gender roles and double standards in judging women's and men's behavior, and is associated with the endorsement of oppressive beliefs against women, as well as with a focus on women's physical appearance (Forbes et al., 2007).

In order to measure tolerance of sexual harassment, we relied on theorization on sexual harassment myths acceptance (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008), broadly defined as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male

harassment of women" (p. 600). Such myths serve to deny the occurrence of sexual harassment or to downplay its adverse consequences while shifting responsibility and contributory guilt to women who are targets of sexual harassment (Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014). Finally, we examined the perception of sexual-abuse allegations in the Weinstein scandal by focusing on respondents' attribution of responsibility to and perceived motives of the women who reported sexual misconduct (skepticism towards sexual abuse allegations) and measured respondents' attitudes towards the #MeToo movement in terms of its perceived usefulness.

Since individuals construct gender schemas and sexualized beliefs as a consequence of their exposure to cultural conceptions of genders and sexuality (Bigler et al., 2019; Ruble et al., 2006), it seems likely that women who have internalized a sexualized image of themselves will also endorse a broader array of cultural views of gender roles (e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Namely, we advanced that women's internalized sexualization would be positively related to sexist attitudes (*hypothesis 1a*).

As mentioned, women with high levels of internalized sexualization believe that women's ideal role is to be sexually alluring to men and that men naturally respond to such women with sexual interest and behavior (Brown, 2019; McKenney & Bigler, 2016a). When faced with sexual harassment episodes which might often leave some room for ambiguity, those women are more likely to justify the perpetrator's behavior as an understandable response to the situation while shifting responsibility to the victim. Thus, consistent with previous evidence on the correlates of self-objectification (Bernard et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2015), we expected that internalized sexualization would be positively associated with sexual harassment myth acceptance (*hypothesis 1b*).

In the same vein, we reasoned that internalized sexualization should be positively related to higher skepticism about sexual abuse allegations in the Weinstein scandal made through the #MeToo movement. We acknowledge, however, there are reasons to expect low or no variations in women's evaluations of these episodes, regardless of the levels of internalized sexualization. Actresses and other celebrities are often presented in a hypersexualized fashion and valued according to their sexual allure (e.g., Heldman, Frankel, & Holmes, 2016; Lamb & Koven, 2019). Besides enhancing victim-blaming, the strong sexualization of the alleged victims in the Weinstein scandal might lead women who do not value being sexually attractive to men – i.e., women low in internalized sexualization – to feel somewhat distant and little empathic towards the victims.

However, as discussed earlier, previous evidence has consistently highlighted that valuing beauty ideals and practices and self-objectifying are related to higher endorsement of traditional gender roles and tolerance of sexual harassment (Bernard et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2015). In a similar vein, it

seems plausible that women who adopt a sexualized view of social relations will see sexual intercourse as “natural” outcome of man-woman interactions and will therefore be more prone to doubt of the agenda of women – especially women who strongly care about their sexual attractiveness – who accused powerful men of sexual abuse, and did so long time after the episodes. Accordingly, we expected that internalized sexualization would be positively associated with higher skepticism about allegations of sexual misconduct in the Weinstein scandal (*hypothesis 2a*). For the same reasons, internalized sexualization should be associated with more negative attitudes towards the #MeToo movement, which represents a collective action aimed to support women who reported sexual abuse (*hypothesis 2b*).

Finally, we tested the hypothesis that sexist attitudes and acceptance of sexual harassment myths sequentially mediate these associations. Previous research has pointed out that hostile attitudes and sexism towards women are related to attitudes about sexual harassment (Hill & Marshall, 2018; Lonsway et al., 2008; Russell & Hoswald, 2015; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and sexual harassment proclivity (Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995). Sexism is deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, which fuel views of women as inferior to men and hostility towards women who go beyond the boundaries of the prescribed feminine role, even among other women (Glick & Hilt, 2000; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). On this basis, we posited that sexist attitudes – which represent general attitudes towards men’s and women’s role in society – should mediate the association between internalized sexualization and sexual harassment myths acceptance (*hypothesis 3a*). In turn, sexual harassment myths acceptance should be positively associated with skepticism about sexual harassment allegations (*hypothesis 3b*) and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement (*hypothesis 3c*).

## Method

### Participants

First- and second-year female undergraduate students ( $N = 222$ ) enrolled in a Psychology course in a large public university of North Italy voluntarily participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 29 years ( $M = 21.43$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ) and were all of Italian nationality.

### Procedure and Measures

The Bioethical Committee of the first author’s institution approved the study in March 2018. Participants completed an online questionnaire through the Qualtrics platform. The questionnaire contained measures of internalized sexualization, sexist attitudes, acceptance of sexual harassment myths,

skepticism towards sexual abuse allegations, and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement.<sup>1</sup> Because the measure of internalized sexualization was originally developed for American pre-adolescent and adolescent girls (McKenney & Bigler, 2016a), we pretested an Italian version of the measure adapted for young adult women. Following the cognitive interviewing method (Presser et al., 2004), we asked a convenience sample of 25 undergraduate Psychology students (aged 19 to 23; all women) to comment upon the comprehensibility and the appropriateness of each original item for Italian adult women through open-ended questions. Pre-testers also commented upon the other measures. Items that were considered ambiguous or inappropriate for Italian adult respondents were discarded or rewritten, as detailed below.

**Internalized Sexualization** Internalized sexualization was measured through a revised version of McKenney and Bigler’s (2016a) scale. The original measure included 37 items, referred to 6 subscales (Peers, Clothes, Compromise, Media, Women’s Body, and Power). We excluded the Peers subscale items (which refers to the degree to which adolescent girls’ peers talk about sexualized activities), the Clothes subscale (referring to sexualized clothing preferences) and the Compromise subscale (tapping girls’ willingness to sacrifice comfort to be sexy) items, as pretesters considered them inappropriate for adult women or ambiguous in the Italian context.

The Media subscale was retained, but we modified the items so that respondents were asked to rate their preferences for (fictitious) titles of four sexualized and four non-sexualized TV shows or magazine articles that were similar to those found in Italian media and were therefore considered credible in the pretest. The sexualized titles were: “Look gorgeous! A model suggests to girls how to look always at their best, so that they don’t show them up in everyday life”, “Seduce him! A show about three girls competing to have the most beautiful guy. Who will he choose?”, “Beach body before summer? Now you can!”, “How to get men’s head turning in five moves”. The non-sexualized titles were: “Want to improve your study method? Advices from the experts”, “Let’s work together for a better environment”, “Cooking challenge: Two amateur chefs compete each week to win a cooking challenge”, “Nature talk: A show about animals’ life in the wild”. Participants were asked “How much would you enjoy watching the following TV shows/read the following magazine articles?” (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). The non-sexualized titles were distractor items and were not considered in further analyses.

The items from the Women’s Body (7 items) and the Power (6 items) subscales were retained. Whereas the original internalized sexualization scale was aimed at young girls who were

<sup>1</sup> The measures of sexist attitudes and sexual harassment myths acceptance were in randomized order. The order was not considered in the main analyses since preliminary analyses have shown that it did not affect findings.

unlikely to be involved in romantic or sexual relationships (McKenney & Bigler, 2016a), in older girls internalized sexualization might imply the enjoyment of male sexualized attention and displaying one's sexuality (Bigler et al., 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018). For this reason, we included 9 items from the adult-focused "Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale" (e.g., "I love to feel sexy", "It is important to me that men are attracted to me"; Liss et al., 2011). The final measure therefore included 17 items referring to three subscales from the Internalized Sexualization scale (media, body, power) and 9 from the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale. We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to determine whether the scale fitted the hypothesized structure, with each item loading on the corresponding subscale (first-order factor), and each of the four subscales loading onto a second-order factor representing the construct of interest. Results indicated that the fit of the model was acceptable ( $\chi^2[295] = 479.829$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.053 [95%CI: 0.044, 0.062]; CFI = 0.925; TLI = 0.917. SRMR = 0.066). To construct a parsimonious path model, we considered internalized sexualization as a single construct.

**Attitudes towards Women** Participants completed a revised short version of the attitudes towards women's scale (Spence et al., 1973) as a measure of sexist attitudes. Some original items were judged obsolete by the pretesters and were omitted (e.g., "Both husband and wife should be allowed the same grounds for divorce"), leaving the measure with 21 items (e.g., "It's not pleasant to hear a woman telling dirty jokes"; "It's ridiculous for a man to darn clothes"; 1 = *not much* and 5 = *very much*). Results from a CFA confirmed that all the items saturated on a single dimension, as expected,  $\chi^2[189] = 250.651$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.038 [95%CI: 0.024, 0.050]; CFI = 0.920; TLI = 0.943. SRMR = 0.090. Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of sexist attitudes.

**Tolerance towards Sexual Harassment** Participants completed a revised version of the Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale (ISHMA; Lonsway et al., 2008). The scale includes 20 items divided into four subscales (fabrication/exaggeration, ulterior motives, natural heterosexuality, and woman's responsibility), which concur to provide a comprehensive global score of tolerance toward sexual harassment. One item ("As long as a woman doesn't lose her job, her claim of sexual harassment shouldn't be taken too seriously") was considered ambiguous by pretesters and was omitted. Thus, the measure included 19 items (e.g., "Women who wait weeks or months to report sexual harassment are probably just making it up"; "If a woman is sexually harassed, she must have done something to invite it"; 1 = *not much* and 5 = *very much*). We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to determine whether the scale fitted the hypothesized structure, with each item loading on the corresponding subscale (first-order factor),

and each of the four subscales loading onto a second-order factor. The fit of the model was acceptable ( $\chi^2[148] = 289.000$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.066 [95%CI: 0.054, 0.077]; CFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.921. SRMR = 0.073), and the global scale score was used in the path model as a single construct.

**Skepticism towards Sexual Abuse Allegations and Attitudes towards the #MeToo Movement** A set of 11 ad hoc items was developed to assess participants' views of the Weinstein scandal and the #MeToo movement in Italy. Eight items focused on participants' blame on women victims and the beliefs that their sexual abuse allegations were shady. Three items assessed participants' view of the #MeToo movement as useless or dangerous. We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to determine whether the items fitted the hypothesized structure with two correlated but separate factors.

The fit of the model was not completely adequate according to commonly adopted fit criteria ( $\chi^2[43] = 111.056$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.084 [95%CI: 0.065, 0.104]; CFI = 0.906; TLI = 0.880. SRMR = 0.074). Inspection of factor loadings showed that one of the three items used to assess views of the #MeToo movement had a non-significant loading on the expected factor ( $\lambda = 0.114$ ,  $p = .101$ ). After deleting the item, fit indices resulted to be acceptable ( $\chi^2[34] = 83.342$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = 0.080 [95%CI: 0.058, 0.102]; CFI = 0.930; TLI = 0.908. SRMR = 0.051). Verbatim items and factor loadings are reported in Table 1.

## Results

### Structural Path Analyses

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas, and bivariate correlations among measures. Overall, respondents showed low scores on internalized sexualization as well as on the other measures. Internalized sexualization was significantly correlated with each of the other measures. Sexist attitudes showed high or moderate correlations with all variables. Unsurprisingly, sexual harassment myths acceptance was strongly correlated with skepticism towards the sexual abuse allegations made by celebrities involved in the Weinstein scandal. The association between sexual harassment myths acceptance and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement was moderate in size.

To test our main hypotheses, we used the software M-plus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2019) to perform structural path analysis. Model parameters were estimated through the Maximum Likelihood Robust (MLR) method to account for possible violations of multivariate normality assumptions. Internalized sexualization was modeled as the main predictor. The two measures concerning participants' views of notorious sexual abuse cases – i.e., skepticism towards sexual abuse

**Table 1** Standardized Factor Loadings for Skepticism toward Sexual Abuse Allegations and Attitudes towards the #MeToo Movement Scale Items

Items	
Skepticism towards sexual abuse allegations	
I find it unfair that some actresses reported sexual harassment after they took advantage of it to have a career	.772
Actresses and showgirls that report sexual harassment after a long time only want to be at the center of attention	.730
Real sexual harassment is very different from the behaviors reported by actresses and showgirls after years have passed	.634
Actresses were right to report producers, after all they've suffered ( <i>R</i> )	.595
I believe actresses would do anything to become famous, even sleep with someone they actually don't want	.667
If actresses agreed to meet producers and directors at their houses, they should have known what they would have face	.577
The actresses involved in sexual harassment could have made career in other ways, instead of agreeing to have sexual intercourse	.610
The actresses involved in the sexual harassment events should have said "no" at the moment instead of reporting after many years	.667
Attitudes towards the #MeToo movement	
The #MeToo and #QuellaVoltaChe movements are useful for understanding the problem of sexual harassment towards women ( <i>R</i> )	.822
The movements #MeToo and #QuellaVoltaChe movements are useful for encouraging every woman to report harassments and assaults ( <i>R</i> )	.858

*R* recoded item

allegations and attitudes towards #MeToo – were included in the model as parallel outcomes. Sexist attitudes and acceptance of sexual harassment myths were inserted in the model as sequential mediators of the link between internalized sexualization and the two outcome measures.

Our study design did not allow us to determine causal effects. Thus, we began by using a model comparison approach to assess whether our hypothesized model provided a better fit to the data as compared to two alternative (yet plausible) orderings of the measured variables. In detail, we tested an alternative sequential model in which internalized sexualization was assumed not to be the main distal predictor of participants' skepticism towards sexual abuse cases, as we originally hypothesized, but rather a mere byproduct of participants' sexist attitudes. To do so, we reversed the causal ordering of internalized sexualization and sexist attitudes, and we consequently posited internalized sexualization as a mediator between sexist attitudes and sexual harassment myths acceptance. Then, we tested a second alternative model in which we assumed sexist attitudes and sexual harassment myths acceptance to be parallel – and not sequential – mediators of the link between internalized

sexualization and the two outcome measures. As the three competing models were non-nested, the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) were used to compare the models' relative fit to the data, with AIC and BIC differences higher than 5 indicating strong evidence in favor of the model with the lower AIC and BIC values. Results from the structural path analysis revealed that the fit indices for the hypothesized model (AIC = 1358.641; BIC = 1419.889) were markedly lower than those for both the alternative sequential model (AIC = 1480.872; BIC = 1542.121; ΔAIC/BIC = 122.231) and the parallel mediation model (AIC = 1412.524; BIC = 1470.370; ΔAIC = 53.883; ΔBIC = 50.481), thus indicating that the hypothesized model provided a more adequate representation of the observed data.

The sequential mediation model appears in Fig. 1. Complete results, including unstandardized and standardized estimates for direct, indirect, and total effects, are reported in Table 3. Internalized sexualization was positively associated with the proposed mediators, that is, sexist attitudes (hypothesis 1a) and sexual harassment myths acceptance (hypothesis 1b). Partly consistent with our expectations, the direct path

**Table 2** Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability Coefficients and Correlations among Study Measures

	Descriptive Statistics			Correlations				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Internalized Sexualization	2.41	0.55	.89	1	.34***	.40***	.38***	.14*
2. Sexist attitudes	1.58	0.42	.81		1	.54***	.48***	.26***
3. Sexual harassment myths acceptance	1.77	0.49	.88			1	.71***	.26***
4. Skepticism towards allegations	2.26	0.78	.85				1	.30***
5. Attitudes towards #MeToo	1.75	0.86	.83					1

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001

**Table 3** Unstandardized and Standardized Direct and Indirect Effects

	Sexist Attitudes			Sexual Harassment Myths Acceptance (ISHMA)			Skepticism towards Allegations			Attitudes towards the #MeToo Movement		
	<i>B (SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Direct effects												
Internalized Sexualization	0.262 (0.050)	.344	<.001	0.219 (0.058)	.246	<.001	0.072 (0.079)	.049	.365	0.030 (0.112)	.019	.793
Sexist Attitudes	–	–	–	0.539 (0.079)	.460	<.001	0.240 (0.109)	.124	.028	0.315 (0.149)	.154	.027
ISHMA	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.004 (0.083)	.612	<.001	0.301 (0.133)	.173	.028
Indirect effects												
Internalized sexualization→Sexist attitudes→	–	–	–	0.141 (0.035)	.158	<.001	0.063 (0.032)	.043	.049	0.082 (0.040)	.053	.040
Internalized Sexualization→ISHMA→	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.220 (0.061)	.150	<.001	0.066 (0.034)	.042	.053
Internalized Sexualization→Sexist Attitudes→ISHMA→	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.141 (0.036)	.097	<.001	0.042 (0.022)	.027	.058
Total effects												
$R^2$	.11		.003	.35		<.001	.50		<.001	.08		.023

between internalized sexualization beliefs about allegations was significant (hypotheses 2a), whereas the direct path between internalized sexualization and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement (hypothesis 2b) was not. As expected, the relation between internalized sexualization and sexual harassment myths acceptance was partly mediated by increased sexist attitudes (hypothesis 3a), and the sequential mediation path from internalized sexualization to the outcome variable through the two proposed mediators was significant (hypothesis 3b). A significant simple mediation path emerged between internalized sexualization and skepticism towards abuse allegations measure through sexual harassment myths acceptance, but not through sexist attitudes alone.

Concerning attitudes towards the #MeToo movement, the analyses provided partial support for hypothesis 3c. The sequential indirect path through sexist attitudes and sexual harassment myths acceptance did not reach statistical significance. Instead, sexist attitudes fully mediated the association between internalized sexualization and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement. The simple indirect path through sexual harassment myths acceptance fell short of significance.

## Discussion

This study's primary aim was to examine whether internalized sexualization is positively related to women's sexist views and their beliefs about women's claims of sexual harassment, abuse, and mistreatment, including those reported through the #MeToo movement. Overall, the findings supported the general expectation that the more women have internalized the idea that they should be sexually attractive to men, the more

they endorse sexist attitudes, accept general beliefs that justify sexual harassment and are skeptical of women's allegations in the Weinstein scandal. However, there was only an indirect relation between internalized sexualization and attitudes towards the #MeToo movement through sexist attitudes.

Specifically, internalized sexualization was positively related to sexist attitudes (hypothesis 1a) and acceptance of sexual harassment myths (hypothesis 1b). These findings are consistent with previous research on the adverse consequences of women's sexualization and objectification on sexism and tolerance of sexual harassment (Bernard et al., 2016; Milburn et al., 2000). Whereas most studies considered the impact of the exposure to sexualized representations of women (Ward, 2016), or focused on the correlates of self-objectification (Bernard et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2015), the present study extends the literature by showing that women's internalization of the idea that they should be sexually attractive to men is associated with their general attitudes towards gender roles and gender discrimination in the society.

An important novelty of this study relies on its focus on women's views of the sexual abuse allegations in the Weinstein scandal. Supporting hypothesis 2a, higher levels of internalized sexualization were associated with higher skepticism towards such allegations that sparked the #MeToo movement. This result adds to Maes et al.'s (2019) findings that adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit material is linked to negative views of sexual assault victims who shared their stories via #MeToo. However, the present findings provided no support for the expected direct association between internalized sexualization and attitudes towards the #MeToo (hypothesis 2b).

Concerning our mediation hypotheses, findings were mixed. As expected, sexist attitudes mediated the association



between internalized sexualization and sexual harassment myths acceptance (hypothesis 3a), and both sexist attitudes and sexual harassment myths acceptance worked as sequential mediators of skepticism about notorious sexual abuse allegations (hypothesis 3b). However, there was no evidence of sequential mediation concerning attitudes towards the #MeToo movement (hypothesis 3c). Instead, a significant indirect link between internalized sexualization and the outcome emerged through sexist attitudes. Thus, among women, internalized sexualization is accompanied by traditional views of women, their rights, and their position in society. Women who hold such traditional views are, in turn, more likely to question the worth of the #MeToo movement, regardless of their general beliefs concerning sexual harassment. Even though this study’s correlational nature does not allow to draw causal conclusions, overall, one might conclude that internalizing the belief that women should be sexually attractive to men might result in women’s lower solidarity to other women, and even refraining women from supporting, and participating in, collective actions against gender inequalities (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011).

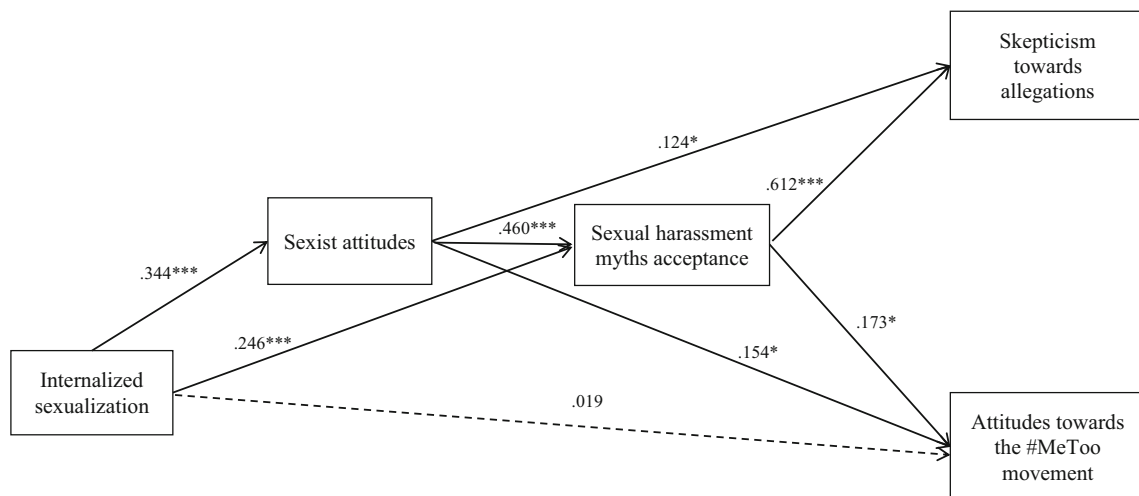
**Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of this study concerns the restriction in the range of attitudes endorsed by our participants, a convenience sample of university students. Overall, respondents did not show high levels of internalized sexualization in absolute terms, nor did they report strong sexist views or negative attitudes towards the #MeToo movement. These findings are unsurprising since younger and more educated women typically show a lower endorsement of traditional stereotypical gender attitudes than older and less educated women (e.g., Glick, Lameiras, & Castro, 2002). Nevertheless, there was adequate variation within our convenience sample to examine – and detect – the expected relations among measures. Future

research should, however, test the replicability of these findings using more diverse, community samples. It would also be important to consider both women’s and men’s attitudes and examine how men and women can become allies in confronting gender discrimination (e.g., Drury & Kaiser, 2014).

A further limitation of this study is that it relies on cross-sectional data, limiting the possibility of inferences concerning the causal direction of the effects. Our findings showed statistical support for the claim that internalized sexualization is likely to influence individuals’ level of sexism against an alternative sequential model, in which sexist attitudes were posited as antecedents of internalized sexualization. The finding that traditional, sexist attitudes towards women do not necessarily lead to internalized sexualization makes intuitive sense. Endorsing traditional beliefs about women might, for example, lead women to believe that they should be modest and demure, or act as sexual gatekeepers, rather than to consciously and purposefully seek male sexual attention. More generally, future research should adopt an experimental approach to address this issue. In particular, it would be interesting to test a two-step model by examining the impact of exposure to sexualized representations of women on women’s internalization of a sexualized image of themselves and, through it, on individuals’ attitudes and beliefs concerning gender and sexual roles (for similar reasoning, see Ward et al., 2018).

In the present study, the measures related to the #MeToo movement were the last to be completed; thus, we are confident that thinking about the #MeToo movement did not affect the other measures. However, in principle, it is possible that being reminded of sexual harassment reports by women (e.g., the claims associated with the #MeToo movement) fosters endorsement of sexist attitudes and tolerance of sexual harassment among women and men. For example, Becker (2010) reported that women were more likely to agree with



**Fig. 1** Path Model (N = 222): Relations among Study Variables. Note. Standardized coefficients for direct paths; \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001

hostile sexist beliefs when they thought about non-traditional subtypes of women (e.g., feminists, career women) rather than about women in general. Future longitudinal or experimental studies might examine whether, for some women, exposure to news and debates about the #MeToo movement would *increase* hostility and sexism against women.

As mentioned, the public debate on #MeToo has been more limited in Italy than in other Western countries and has been largely intertwined to notorious abuse allegations cases (Horowitz, 2017; Siri, 2017). Although the overemphasis on cases involving public figures has been noted even elsewhere (e.g., Bennett, 2018; De Benedictis et al., 2019), in other countries the movement has certainly been accompanied by a more extensive debate and has more clearly encompassed the experiences of ordinary women who are not necessarily the embodiment of male ideals of sexual attractiveness. Thus, we are aware that this study might have failed to capture broader conceptions of the #MeToo movement and that these findings might not be directly translated to other cultural contexts.

In a related way, it is important to consider that Italy, like other Mediterranean societies, represents, to a certain extent, a “culture of honor.” Cultures of honor place value on norms of precedence and toughness for men and norms of modesty and shame for women (Rodriguez-Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Accordingly, they emphasize the importance that women avoid behaviors (such as sexual immodesty or adultery) that might threaten a family’s reputation, and can even (implicitly or explicitly) justify male violence against women if functional to preserve the integrity of the man and the family (Pagliaro, Pacilli, & Baldry, 2020; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). It seems plausible that the pattern observed in this research might be different in countries that do not place so much value on honor or vice-versa in cultural contexts that condone sexist beliefs, and even violence, to a greater extent (as it might be in some Middle East and Arab cultures). It is, therefore, important that future research take cultural differences into account in order to deepen our knowledge on the correlates of internalized sexualization.

## Conclusions

Social, legal, and educational efforts to address sexual abuse, harassment, and mistreatment, including the #MeToo movement, are unquestionably positive steps toward gender equality. They are important for allowing victims of sexual abuse, harassment, and mistreatment to share their experiences, encouraging other individuals to report their assaulters, and feeding social connections and building support among victims. Indeed, digital feminist activism, including the use of hashtags like #MeToo, contributes to raise women’s solidarity and consciousness and might, therefore, facilitate social change (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018).

At the same time, the increasing prevalence of messages that sexualize girls and women within Western countries is likely to undermine these efforts. These results showed for the first time that women’s internalization of the notion that they should be sexually attractive might feeding women’s acceptance of sexism and unfavorable views of actions in favor of women themselves. Thus, the present study contributes to the search for factors that contribute to the spread of sexist culture in our society, suggesting that in the fight against gender discrimination and sexual abuse, future efforts should be addressed to the understanding of how to minimize children’s and girls’ internalization of a sexualized image of themselves.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. The study was conducted in accordance with APA regulations and obtained the approval of the University of Bologna Ethical Committee in March 2018. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. The research reported in this article was supported by RFO funds to the first author. Data can be found on the project’s OSF page [https://osf.io/2ntsk/?view\\_only=4fbbe342cce64796b6a2796b0488ebaf](https://osf.io/2ntsk/?view_only=4fbbe342cce64796b6a2796b0488ebaf)

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