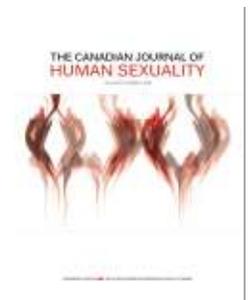




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Oversexualization among emerging adults: Preliminary associations with romantic attachment and intimacy

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This study examined romantic attachment and intimacy as correlates of oversexualized behaviours and attitudes among emerging adults. A sample of 587 participants (494 women, 93 men) aged between 18 and 29 completed a series of online questionnaires assessing oversexualization, romantic attachment, and intimacy. Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to explore the associations between these variables and examine the moderating role of sex. Results revealed that attachment-related anxiety was associated with overinvestment in sexual appearance, sexual objectification, and performance-based sexuality. This last association was stronger for men than for women. Attachment-related avoidance was associated with seduction and lower meaningfulness of sexuality. In addition, while sexualized language was related to a better perception of emotional, social, sexual, and recreational intimacy, meaningfulness of sexuality was positively related to all dimensions of intimacy. Conversely, sexual objectification was related to lower recreational intimacy, seductive attitude was related to lower emotional intimacy, and overinvestment in one's sexualized appearance was related to lower sexual intimacy. For men only, overinvestment in sexualized appearance was also related to higher perceived social intimacy. Theoretical and clinical implications of these results are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Intimacy, oversexualization, romantic attachment, sexuality, young adults

The term “hypersexualization” has emerged from concerns raised as a result of an increase in sexually explicit content shared in the media over the last 50 years (Nalkur, Jamieson, & Romer, 2010; Wright, 2009). Social hypersexualization has been described as the overexposure and facilitated accessibility of sexualized and unattainable standards of beauty portrayed in the media, as well as the normalization of pornography in popular culture (McNair, 1996; Poulin, 2008). Studies have revealed that identifying with these sexualized messages and models portrayed in the media is associated with a number of negative repercussions for young girls and women, including poor self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, sexism, and early sexualization (e.g., Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Mercurio & Landry, 2008). Boys and men are also targeted by sexual stereotypes encouraging a mesomorph silhouette, which can contribute to a lower sense of self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and body image issues (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Hausenblas et al., 2013). While the detrimental effects of overexposure to sexual content among children and adolescents have gained growing interest within the research community, less is known

about how emerging adults integrate these messages in their social construction of sexuality and how the incorporation of these messages can benefit or hinder their intimate relationships. This information is particularly important considering that emerging adults tend to consolidate their identity and explore their sexuality and intimacy through the formation of romantic relationships (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25) hence appears to be a critical developmental period for the study of sexualization. Accordingly, the current study aims to fill this gap in the literature by exploring two correlates of the integration of sexualized messages among emerging adults: romantic attachment and intimacy.

FROM HYPERSEXUALIZATION TO OVERSEXUALIZATION

In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) conducted an extensive literature review and defined youth sexualization—or hypersexualization—as including four components: (1) a person's value is based solely on his or her sexual appeal or behaviour; (2) a cultural standard that

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equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; (3) sexual objectification (i.e., when a person is portrayed as an “object” for others’ sexual use, rather than regarded as an autonomous person); and (4) sexuality as inappropriately imposed upon a person (APA, 2007). Because the prefix “hyper” was used to characterize underage sexualization, an adult-specific label, “oversexualization,” was adopted to indicate the transposition of this phenomenon to adulthood (Brassard, Houde, Caouette, Lussier, & de Pierrepont, 2016).

Brassard et al. (2016) conducted a series of studies in order to conceptualize and operationalize oversexualization among emerging adults. In a first qualitative study, they triangulated data from adult men and women, practitioners intervening with young adults, and the literature to provide a definition of oversexualization:

Adult oversexualization is the adoption of sociocultural standards and sexual messages promoted by the society resulting in the sexual objectification of one's body in order to appeal to others, achieved through the sexualization of relations by way of seductive behaviour, strong sexual content in conversations, and a pornographic-inspired repertoire of sexual behaviours (p. 19).

Based on this integrative view of adult oversexualization, they conducted a second study to create and validate the Adult Oversexualization Questionnaire (AOQ; Brassard et al., 2016). The AOQ measures six dimensions of adult oversexualized behaviours and attitudes: 1) *Overinvolvement in one's sexualized appearance* (significant emphasis, value, and efforts put towards one's body and appearance in an effort to be attractive based on social norms); 2) *Sexualized-self objectification* (instrumental use of one's sexualized body to attract potential partners, get attention, popularity, or love); 3) *Sexualized language* (readily talking to others about one's intimate sexual experiences, regardless of the context); 4) *Sexuality based on performance* (pressure to perform sexually, according to external standards, the partner's needs, or pornography); 5) *Meaningfulness of sexuality* (one's view of sexuality as a respectful, meaningful, and intimate act in a committed relationship, reversed scale); and 6) *Seduction* (describing oneself as a person who seduces others regardless of their marital status) (Brassard et al., 2016). Although the term “oversexualization” may appear negative, the authors argue that every adult, man or woman, internalizes sexual messages to some degree and, as such, the scales represent non-pathological continuums. Yet, since sexuality is socially construed (i.e., its meaning is assigned by society and this meaning can vary across different time periods or cultures), a phenomenon such as oversexualization is essentially time and culture sensitive and can only be interpreted in the context of the society one lives in (Brassard et al., 2016).

In two other studies involving French-Canadian community samples ($N_1 = 872$, $N_2 = 540$), Brassard et al. (2016) found that most dimensions of oversexualization were related to negative outcomes, such as lower self-esteem, higher body shame, sexual anxiety, sexual distress, sexual precocity, and sexual risk-taking behaviours. Sexualized language and meaningfulness however, were related to more positive aspects of sexuality,

notably higher sexual self-esteem. In another sample of 1275 French-Canadian adults, Brassard, Lachapelle, Bourassa, and de Pierrepont (2018) also found that overinvolvement in one's sexualized appearance was related to sexual pain, whereas sexual objectification was related to lower orgasm satisfaction. Yet, seduction and sexuality based on performance were associated with young adults' higher sexual desire. Overall, these results suggest a nuanced portrait of oversexualization as a non-pathological construct.

Since initial psychological and sexual correlates of oversexualization have been investigated, it is now essential to examine how oversexualization manifests itself in the context of intimate relationships. Today's emerging adults enjoy unprecedented freedom in love and sex, whilst also facing social pressures advocating that they partake in several sexual or romantic relationships before making a long-term commitment (Arnett, 2004). For instance, Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) found that 78% of young adults (i.e., ages 18–30) reported having experienced sexual intercourse at least once without commitment (hook up), with an average of 10.8 short-term relationships. In 2012, Statistics Canada revealed that 30.8% of young adults in their twenties cohabited with a stable partner, a proportion that is significantly lower to the 51.8% measured in 1981. Moreover, 60% of Canadian couples living in de facto union separate before they reach their thirties (Statistics Canada, 2006). It is thus important to study the unions formed during young adulthood, as well as to assess how sexual socialization may hinder young adults' capacity to establish intimate relationships.

ADULT ATTACHMENT

Adult attachment theory provides an interesting framework for studying interpersonal and sexual dynamics of romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The theory originates from previous work by Bowlby (1982) as well as Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978), who studied young children's emotional attachments to their caregivers. Their findings indicate that early attachment relationships are at the heart of a person's internal working models or schemas of self and relationship partners, which impact feelings and behaviours within close relationships all the way through adulthood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) described individual differences in adult attachment according to two relatively independent dimensions of attachment insecurity: anxiety and avoidance. Attachment-related anxiety implies a fear of being rejected and abandoned by a partner, whereas attachment-related avoidance is characterized by discomfort with emotional closeness and interdependence with a partner. Lower levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance point to attachment security, which is characterized as one's sense of self as lovable and able to rely on others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). A vast body of literature has documented how these two attachment insecurities influence people's experiences in intimate relationships (for a review, see Feeney, 2016), including sexual experiences (Birnbaum, 2007).

Attachment and Sexuality. Several studies involving community samples have shown that both attachment-related anxiety and avoidance are associated with less satisfying sexual experiences (see Stefanou & McCabe, 2012, for a review), greater sexual anxiety (Brassard, Dupuy, Bergeron, & Shaver, 2015), lower levels of arousal and pleasure (Birnbaum, 2007; Hazan, Zeifman, & Middleton, 1994), as well as lower sexual self-esteem (Brassard et al., 2015).

More specifically, adults high on attachment-related anxiety have been found to evaluate the quality of their relationship based on the quality of their sexual relationship, which they equate with the feeling of being loved and esteemed (Dewitte, 2012). Thus, disappointing sexual experiences are interpreted as signs of disapproval by their partner and prompt a fear of being abandoned (Reis, 2006). Attachment-related anxiety is also related to more severe criticism of one's level of sex appeal (Hazan, Campa, & Gur-Yaish, 2006). The intense desire to feel valued sexually can also foster acceptance of otherwise unwanted sexual acts among anxiously attached individuals (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003). Based on these studies, it appears that anxiously attached adults would be at higher risk of internalizing sexual messages and objectifying themselves to feel loved. Some associations between attachment-related anxiety and sexuality have been found to differ across gender: women tend to engage in sexual activities to satisfy their need for proximity, prevent the loss of their partner, or feel reassured about their love (Birnbaum, Mikulincer, & Austerlitz, 2013; Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008), whereas men are more likely to pressure their partner to engage in sexuality (Brassard, Shaver, & Lussier, 2007). This suggests that men and women high on attachment-related anxiety may differ in the manner in which they experience their sexuality. Nonetheless, the ways in which men and women differ with regards to the extent to which they present oversexualized attitudes and behaviours remains unknown.

In contrast, adults high on attachment-related avoidance are inclined to keep an emotional distance and resist commitment with a partner, a tendency that can be explained by their discomfort with intimacy and their desire to remain self-reliant (Dewitte, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Among young adults, avoidance has been related to an exaggerated fear of sexuality, abstinence or promiscuity, and superficial or short-term sex (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Avoidant individuals also tend to prefer sexual activities that are free of emotional content and that do not foster intimacy (Hazan et al., 1994). Their self-centered sexuality often lacks empathy and ignores their partners' need for intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Avoidant men, but not women, are also more prone to use sexual coercion to fulfil their need for power and domination (Tracy et al., 2003). Although no study has examined the links between attachment-related avoidance and oversexualization, the above-mentioned findings suggest that avoidant young adults may be less likely to view sexuality as meaningful.

ROMANTIC INTIMACY

A great body of research depicts intimacy as a central aspect of interpersonal relationships (Prager & Roberts, 2004; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). From Erikson's perspective (1959), intimacy is developed between the ages of 18 and 30 years, a time interval that corresponds to the period of emerging adulthood, which for many, "lasts through the late twenties" (Arnett, 2004, p. 24). Intimacy is an interpersonal process by which two partners experiment and express feelings, communicate, learn about themselves, and grow closer (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Self-disclosure contributes to create a sense of subjective intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Schaefer & Olson, 1981), whereas being heard, understood, and validated helps establish an intimate bond (Prager, 1995; see Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004, for a review). Schaefer and Olson's (1981) conceptualization of romantic intimacy across five dimensions (emotional, intellectual, social, sexual, recreational) captures the subjective perception of intimacy in casual or romantic relationships.

Intimacy and oversexuality. To our knowledge, no empirical study to date has examined the association between oversexualization and romantic intimacy. However, it has been shown that identity precedes and is crucial to intimacy (Beyers & Seiffge, 2010; Erikson, 1959). If young adults fail to consolidate their identity, the sense of proximity—which is essential to intimacy—will be experienced as scary rather than rewarding (Erikson, 1959). Since identity is formed and consolidated through interactions between individuals, their groups, and their ideologies (Bailey, 1991; Fogel, 1993), it is possible that exposure to sexually explicit images and stereotyped models influences one's construction of identity by suggesting ideals and norms to comply with.

Studies investigating new forms of social and sexual relationships, such as *hook ups*, *friends with benefits*, *sex buddies*, or *booty calls*, could be indirectly supporting a link between oversexuality and low intimacy. These relationships refer to recreational sexuality and differ from traditional dating as they emphasize seduction and sexual activities (e.g., kissing, oral sex, manual stimulation), yet minimize consistent communication, intimacy, and commitment (Bogle, 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000). Similarly, studies have shown that regular exposition to pornography is related to lower intimacy between partners and higher desire to engage in affairs with other partners (e.g., Stulhofer, Busko, & Landripet, 2010). Men who are accepting of the depictions of the feminine body in pornography tend to be less sensitive to their partners' need for intimacy and to be uncomfortable with intimacy (Brooks, 1995). Young women who report having a compulsive sexuality (e.g., excessive masturbation, multiple and anonymous partners, excessive consumption of pornography) also report lower levels of romantic intimacy (Stulhofer, Jelovica, & Ruzic, 2008).

Intimacy may also be hindered by the unrealistic beauty standards promoted by society, which contribute to body image concerns among young women (e.g., Bohn et al., 2008; Tantleff-Dunn & Gokee, 2002). Female university students

who are dissatisfied with their bodies tend to display less emotionally intimate behaviours such as self-disclosure (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), and to experience more anxiety related to physical intimacy. Men's body dissatisfaction has also been associated with a lower degree of sexual intimacy in their relationships (Goins, Markey, & Gillen, 2012). Considering that social pressure on men's body image is growing (Thompson & Cafri, 2007), it is necessary to explore how both men and women, who invest heavily on their physical appearance, experience intimacy with a partner.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Emerging adults find themselves in a phase of their development in which they seek committed romantic relationships (Arnett, 2004). The degree to which they have internalized the sexual messages disseminated by the society could potentially modify their perceptions of intimate and sexual relationships, contributing to their choices, beliefs, and sexual preferences (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). It is therefore particularly pertinent to explore how attachment insecurity relates to oversexualized behaviour in early adulthood. It is also essential to examine whether oversexualization actually interferes with the experience of intimacy with a partner. The present exploratory study aimed to provide a preliminary glance into the correlates of oversexualization, manifested in the context of emerging adults' romantic relationships. We hypothesized that individuals higher on attachment insecurity (anxiety, avoidance) would be more likely to display oversexualized behaviours. We also postulated that oversexualized behaviours and attitudes would be related to lower levels of romantic intimacy. Sex differences in these associations were also examined.

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 587 French-Canadian adults (494 women, 93 men) aged between 18 and 29 years ($M = 23.3$, $SD = 3.03$), who were involved in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months and lived in the province of Quebec. The majority of participants were full-time college students (76%), 13.8% were working full-time, while 10.2% worked part-time, were unemployed, or were on maternity leave. On average, participants reported 16.28 years of education ($SD = 2.53$). Their average income was CAN \$17,352 ($SD = 14,462$). Most participants described their relationship as heterosexual (95.7%), and reported an average relationship length of 3.14 years ($SD = 2.42$). Over half of the participants lived with their partner (51.4%), 42.9% were dating, and 5.6% were married. Most participants were childless (88.9%).

Most participants reported having had intercourse at least once in their lifetime (98.1%). The average age for the first intercourse was 16.27 years ($SD = 2.16$). The average number of

sex partners was 7.67 ($Mdn = 5$, $SD = 10.32$). Sexual attraction was, for the most part, felt towards a partner of the opposite sex (77.3%), whereas 11.2% of the participants were attracted to same-sex partners.

Procedure

Most participants were recruited through their college or university. They received an e-mail from their professors or lecturers inviting them to complete an online survey on a secure website (all communications and measures were presented in French). To reach young adults from the community (non-students), we also advertised the study on various social network platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, distribution list from a psychological association) and distributed posters in public places. Individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate were asked to anonymously complete a 45-minute long series of online questionnaires (presented in randomized order) on a secure website. This study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) of our institution.

Instruments

Romantic attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998; Lafontaine & Lussier, 2003) assesses attachment anxiety and avoidance. It includes 36 items rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Higher scores on either anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned") or avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down") show greater attachment insecurity. The French translation of the ECR has good internal consistency for both the anxiety ($\alpha = .86$ to $.89$) and the avoidance ($\alpha = .85$ to $.89$) subscales in community samples, as well as good factorial validity (Lafontaine & Lussier, 2003). The current study obtained adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$ for anxiety and $\alpha = .90$ for avoidance).

Oversexualization. The Adult Oversexualization Questionnaire (AOQ; Brassard et al., 2016) comprises 30 items rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). Five items assess each of the following six subscales: 1) *Overinvolvement in one's sexualized appearance* (e.g., "I make a lot of efforts to change what is wrong in my appearance"); 2) *Sexualized-self objectification* (e.g., "When I want to seduce others, I wear revealing clothing"); 3) *Sexualized language* (e.g., "I do not refrain from talking about my sexuality, even if there are people around"); 4) *Sexuality based on performance* (e.g., "I put a lot of pressure on myself to perform sexually"); 5) *Meaningfulness of sexuality* (e.g., "Sexual relations have an important meaning for me beyond the physical experience"); and 6) *Seduction* (e.g., "It's natural for me to charm others"). Brassard et al. (2016) reported subscale alpha coefficients varying from .73 to .91. In the current sample, reliability estimates were adequate for appearance ($\alpha = .90$), objectification ($\alpha = .90$), sexualized language ($\alpha = .85$), sexuality based on

performance ($\alpha = .69$), meaningfulness of sexuality ($\alpha = .70$), and seduction ($\alpha = .83$).

Romantic intimacy. The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR; Schaefer & Olson, 1981) evaluates the levels of perceived intimacy in a relationship. It relies on 36 items ranging from 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The level of intimacy is measured in five areas: 1) *emotional* (e.g., “My partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to”); 2) *social* (e.g., “We enjoy spending time with other couples”); 3) *sexual* (e.g., “I am satisfied with our sex life”); 4) *intellectual* (e.g., “My partner helps me clarify my thoughts”); and 5) *recreational* (e.g., “We enjoy same recreational activities”). Schaefer and Olson (1981) have reported acceptable reliability for the five subscales: emotional ($\alpha = .86$), social ($\alpha = .64$), sexual ($\alpha = .80$), intellectual ($\alpha = .79$), and recreational ($\alpha = .77$). In our sample, alpha coefficients were adequate for emotional intimacy ($\alpha = .82$), social intimacy ($\alpha = .70$; with one item removed), sexual intimacy ($\alpha = .72$), intellectual intimacy ($\alpha = .72$), and recreational intimacy ($\alpha = .70$).

Social desirability. To assess socially desirable responding bias, we added a brief measure of social desirability. The short version of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1988, shortened and translated in French by D’Amours-Raymond, Cloutier, Frenette, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2010) is a 13-item measure of impression management rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not true*) to 7 (*Very true*). In our study, an alpha of .70 was found, which is consistent with the range of alphas obtained in previous studies (Frenette et al., 2000).

Data analysis strategy

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to verify our hypotheses and examine the moderating role of sex. To test associations between attachment and oversexualization, sex (men = 0; women = 1) was first entered in the equation, followed by centered attachment-related variables (anxiety, avoidance). In the third step, interaction terms (anxiety X sex; avoidance X sex) were added. To examine associations between oversexualization and intimacy, sex was first entered, followed by the six centered oversexualization variables. In the third step, interaction terms (e.g., appearance X sex, language X sex) were entered in the equation using the stepwise approach, in order to maintain satisfying statistical power. When an interaction term was significant, we used Hayes’s (2017) approach to estimate simple slopes and 95% confidence intervals calculated on 5000 bootstrapping samples. Semi-partial correlations (sr^2) were calculated to assess the unique percentage of variance explained by significant predictors (effect sizes).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all study variables. Globally, participants showed low levels of attachment-related avoidance and moderate levels of attachment-related anxiety. They reported relatively high levels of meaningfulness of sexuality as well as low to moderate levels of overinvestment in appearance, sexual self-objectification, sexuality based on performance, sexualized language, and seduction. Participants

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables for all Participants, Women, and Men

	All sample			Women (n = 494)		Men (n = 93)	
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	M	SD
Attachment							
Avoidance	1.95	.78	1.00–6.67	1.90	.76	2.26	.88
Anxiety	3.41	1.06	1.00–6.78	3.45	1.07	3.17	1.00
Oversexualization							
Appearance	3.35	.96	1.07–5.93	* 3.42	.93	3.01	1.03
Objectification	2.63	.94	1.00–5.33	2.61	.93	2.70	1.01
Language	3.00	1.19	1.00–6.00	* 2.95	1.18	3.28	1.23
Performance	3.11	.86	1.00–5.50	* 2.98	.80	3.79	.80
Meaningfulness	5.32	.57	2.86–6.00	* 5.38	.54	5.04	.63
Seduction	2.86	1.12	1.00–6.00	* 2.75	1.06	3.41	1.23
Intimacy							
Emotional	25.02	4.42	6.00–30.00	25.08	4.44	24.70	4.33
Social	22.50	4.85	7.20–30.00	* 22.84	4.78	20.58	4.81
Sexual	24.65	3.88	7.00–30.00	24.77	3.74	24.00	4.52
Intellectual	24.34	4.24	9.00–30.00	24.46	4.25	23.68	4.18
Recreational	25.59	3.50	12.00–30.00	* 25.73	3.50	24.80	3.42
Social desirability							
	4.08	.99	1.00–6.58	4.15	.97	3.75	1.03

* Significant difference at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations among all Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Intimacy													
1. Emotional													
2. Social	.372**												
3. Sexual	.427**	.237**											
4. Intellectual	.721**	.401**	.370**										
5. Recreational	.610**	.423**	.379**	.629**									
Oversexualization													
6. Appearance	-.168**	.000	-.116**	-.176**	-.049								
7. Objectification	-.191**	-.087*	-.094*	-.223**	-.156**	.625**							
8. Language	-.015	.021	.082*	-.042	-.001	.118**	.263**						
9. Performance	-.145**	-.157**	-.045	-.181**	-.102*	.300**	.464**	.294**					
10. Meaningfulness	.274**	.196**	.284**	.298**	.325**	-.039	-.180**	-.164**	-.231**				
11. Seduction	-.205**	-.103**	-.038	-.158**	-.134**	.311**	.478**	.382**	.383**	-.161**			
Attachment													
12. Avoidance	-.547**	-.236**	-.322**	-.454**	-.406**	.077	.135**	.089*	.171**	-.424**	.201**		
13. Anxiety	-.373**	-.233**	-.150**	-.291**	-.171**	.276**	.273**	.027	.214**	-.156**	.104*	.222**	
Desirability													
	.164**	.065	.033	.141**	.107*	-.147**	-.211**	-.267**	-.264**	.170**	-.291**	-.168**	-.141**

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

reported a fairly good perception of intimacy in all five areas, and their levels of social desirability were moderate.

Table 2 displays the bivariate correlations between all main variables and reveals several associations between the intimacy and oversexualization subscales. Significant correlations were also found between attachment insecurities and oversexualization. Correlations between social desirability and the main variables were non-significant or weak in magnitude ($r < 0.30$; see Cohen, 1988), which did not warrant statistical control in the main analyses. Correlations were also conducted to examine potential covariates among demographic variables (age, education, income, relationship length) and also revealed none to small correlations with the main variables.

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted on the main variables and revealed a significant effect of sex ($F(11,573) = 17.52, p < .001$), explaining 25.2% of the variance ($\eta^2 = .252$). As shown in Table 1, women reported higher levels of social and recreational intimacy than men, as well as overinvestment in appearance and meaningfulness of sexuality. On the other hand, men reported higher levels of sexualized language, sexuality based on performance, and seduction than women. Although multivariate effects were found for occupation ($F(22,1144) = 2.18, p = .001, \eta^2 = .040$), marital status ($F(22,1144) = 2.58, p < .001, \eta^2 = .047$), and sexual attraction ($F(22,1140) = 3.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .067$), the small effect sizes (see Cohen, 1988) did not warrant statistical control in the main analyses.

Main analyses

To examine the contribution of attachment insecurities and sex in the prediction of oversexualization (hypothesis 1), six hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted.

Table 3 presents the results of these analyses, showing that sex and attachment insecurities accounted for 8.2% to 21% of the variance in the subscales of oversexualization (R^2).

Attachment-related anxiety was positively related to overinvestment in sexual appearance ($sr^2 = .059$), sexual objectification ($sr^2 = .064$), and sexuality based on performance ($sr^2 = .053$). The adults who were more anxiously attached reported overinvesting in their sexual appearance, using their bodies as objects, and endorsing a performance-based approach to their sexuality. Moreover, a significant interaction between anxiety and sex revealed that the positive association between anxiety and sexuality based on performance was stronger for men ($b = .332, s.e. = .073, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.188; .476]$) than women ($b = .171, s.e. = .036, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.101; .241]$). To a lower extent, attachment-related anxiety was associated with a higher propensity to use seduction in relationships ($sr^2 = .008$), and to a lower tendency to perceive sexuality as a respectful and meaningful act ($sr^2 = .008$).

Results also revealed a significant association between attachment-related avoidance and seduction ($sr^2 = .020$), suggesting that young adults who are more avoidant tend to approach relationships using a seduction mode. Avoidance was also negatively related to meaningfulness of sexuality ($sr^2 = .130$), indicating that avoidant individuals are inclined to prefer sexual intercourse without commitment and to focus on the recreational aspects of sexuality.

To examine the contribution of oversexualization in the prediction of perceived levels of intimacy (hypothesis 2), five hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. Table 4 presents the results of these analyses, showing that sex and oversexualization subscales accounted for 7.4% to 13% of the variance in the subscales of perceived intimacy (R^2).

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Oversexualization Subscales with Attachment Insecurities and Sex

Predictors	Appearance		Objectification		Language		Performance		Meaningfulness		Seduction	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.024***		.001		.010*		.121***		.048***		.048***	
Sex		.138*		-.047		-.092*		-.363***		.165***		-.203***
Step 2	.070***		.081***		.006		.066***		.162***		.036***	
Anxiety		.252***		.262***		.022		.239***		-.090*		.093*
Avoidance		.045		.069		.069		.057		-.377***		.146***
Step 3							.006					
Anxiety X Sex								-.203*				
Avoid X Sex												
R^2	.095***		.082***		.016		.193***		.210***		.083***	
R^2_{adj}	.090***		.078***		.011		.186***		.206***		.078***	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Intimacy with Oversexualization Subscales and Sex

Predictors	Emotional intimacy		Social intimacy		Sexual intimacy		Intellectual intimacy		Recreational intimacy	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.001		.029***		.004		.005		.009	
Sex		-.043		.093*		.04		-.005		.018
Step 2	.125***		.045***		.110***		.126***		.119	
Appearance		-.085		.055		-.133*		-.084		.046
Objectification		-.030		-.049		-.012		-.091		-.127*
Language		.112**		.112*		.143**		.071		.105*
Performance		-.031		-.092		.046		-.054		.022
Meaningfulness		.260***		.156***		.300***		.270***		.309***
Seduction		-.163**		-.059		-.005		-.053		-.083
Step 3			.008*							
Appear X Sex				-.214*						
R^2	.126***		.082***		.114***		.130***		.128	
R^2_{adj}	.115***		.069***		.104**		.120***		.118	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results revealed that sexualized language was positively associated with four areas of intimacy: emotional ($sr^2 = .010$), social ($sr^2 = .010$), sexual ($sr^2 = .017$), and recreational intimacy ($sr^2 = .009$). Although the magnitude of these associations was very small (only 1% of explained variance), they nonetheless suggest that individuals who are able to talk about their sex life with others may perceive higher levels of relational intimacy.

Stronger associations were found between meaningfulness of sexuality and levels of emotional ($sr^2 = .061$), social ($sr^2 = .022$), sexual ($sr^2 = .081$), intellectual ($sr^2 = .066$), and recreational intimacy ($sr^2 = .086$), which explained between 2.2% and 8.6% of the variance of the five areas of intimacy. Individuals who perceived sexuality as a respectful, meaningful, and intimate act in the context of a committed relationship tended

to subjectively experience higher degrees of intimacy in their romantic relationships.

The results also showed that overinvestment in sexualized appearance was associated with a lower level of perceived sexual intimacy ($sr^2 = .010$), indicating that a focus on one's sexual appearance may interfere with the subjective experience of being sexually close to one's intimate partner. A significant interaction between appearance and sex revealed that a positive association existed between appearance and social intimacy for men ($b = 1.287$, $s.e. = .559$, $p = .021$, 95% CI [.190; 2.384]), but not for women ($b = .076$, $s.e. = .308$, $p = .806$, 95% CI [-.529; .680]).

Sexual objectification was negatively related to recreational intimacy ($sr^2 = .008$), suggesting that using one's body as a

sexual object may contribute to the perception of lower levels of shared activities with one's intimate partner. Lastly, the seductive attitude subscale was associated with lower emotional intimacy ($s^2 = .017$), indicating that individuals who use seduction in their interpersonal relationships may be more likely to feel less emotionally intimate with their partner. No significant associations were found for performance-based sexuality.

DISCUSSION

Little is known about how young adults construe their sexuality in a social context marked by significant exposure to sexual content in the media, as well as the ways in which the integration of these socially prescribed sexual messages may contribute to their intimate relationships. This information is particularly important considering that emerging adulthood is a crucial developmental period with respect to the consolidation of identity and the formation of significant intimate relationships. As such, the extent to which young adults internalize sexual messages and norms can have profound and long-lasting effects on their perceptions of intimacy and their relationships. In an effort to shed light on this issue, this exploratory study examined the associations among attachment insecurities, oversexualization, and romantic intimacy in a large sample of emerging adults. Our results revealed that each dimension of attachment insecurity—*anxiety and avoidance*—was significantly related to oversexualized behaviours, and that most dimensions of oversexualization were related to perceived romantic intimacy. Sex differences were also found, which warrant attention.

Oversexualization in Men and Women

Our preliminary results suggest that young men and women may differ in their experience of oversexualization. More specifically, women displayed higher levels of overinvestment in sexualized appearance and meaningfulness of sexuality than men, whereas men evidenced higher levels of sexualized language, performance-based sexuality, and seductive attitude than women. These results partially corroborate the findings of Brassard et al. (2018), who observed similar sex differences regarding appearance, meaningfulness, and performance-based sexuality. Although the media is increasingly targeting men's body image ideals (Ricciardelli & Williams, 2012), it is plausible that women still have a heightened sense of consciousness regarding their appearance since they have been socialized to value thinness and invest in their appearance (Mahalik et al., 2005).

Men's greater tendency to express strong sexual content in their language, to view sexuality as an area of performance, and to use seduction, may be explained by the duality in sexual codes whereby seductive men are valued and envied by their peers, while being openly seductive is associated with lower respectability for women (Bogle, 2007; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011;

Mahalik et al., 2003, 2005). Men's early sexual socialization, suggesting that they should be sexually knowledgeable and skilled (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), combined with their earlier (Stulhofer et al., 2008) and greater (Blais-Lecours, Vaillancourt-Morel, Sabourin, & Godbout, 2016; Wright & Bae, 2015) use of pornography (when compared with women) could also explain their higher levels of performance-based views of sexuality.

Attachment insecurity and oversexualization

In keeping with past research showing that individual differences in attachment contribute to levels of sexual functioning (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Stefanou & McCabe, 2012), and partially supporting our first hypothesis, we found that young adults who experienced more attachment insecurity were more likely to adopt oversexualized behaviours. Specific patterns of results emerged for attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance.

Attachment-related anxiety. We found that emerging adults who reported higher attachment-related anxiety were more likely to overinvest in their sexualized appearance, to objectify their body, and to adopt a performance-based approach to sexuality. To a lesser extent, anxiously attached individuals were also more likely to use seduction and less likely to perceive sexuality as meaningful. These findings suggest that adults with attachment-related anxiety are, as anticipated, at a greater risk of integrating the sexual messages promoting body ideals into their personal attitudes and behaviours. This could mean that having a negative view of the self would make emerging adults more vulnerable to endorse socially prescribed sexual messages.

Previous researchers have suggested that the instinctual and affective energies of anxiously attached individuals tend to be devoted to maintaining a partner's love (Dewitte, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Anxiously attached adults are thus constantly seeking appreciation and reassurance from their partner. Our results went a step further and indicated that anxiously attached emerging adults were more likely to use their body as an object in order to get the attention, love, and approbation they need. Because they perceive their appearance to be constantly subjected to others' attention and appreciation, conforming with sexualized standards of beauty could serve as an attempt to appeal, elicit love and affection, and create an illusion of control over a potential abandonment (e.g., if I am attractive enough, my partner will not leave me). The link between attachment-related anxiety and overinvestment in one's appearance is consistent with the work of Cash, Teri-ault, and Annis (2004), as well as of Hazan and colleagues (2006), who showed that attachment anxiety is associated with enhanced preoccupations about sexual attractiveness, body dissatisfaction, and dysfunctional investment in appearance among men and women.

Our results also revealed that young adults who were more anxiously attached were more likely to adopt a performance-based approach to sexuality. This association was

stronger for men than for women. As proposed by other researchers, sexuality can be used by anxiously attached individuals to appease or compensate for their attachment anxiety (Birnbaum et al., 2013; Impett et al., 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Attachment anxiety has also been associated with stronger concerns about sexual performance (Hazan et al., 1994), as well as the tendency to sacrifice one's own sexual needs and defer to a partner's sexual preferences (Davis et al., 2006). Anxiously attached men however, have been found to be especially prone to base their sexuality on performance, as they are more likely to use sexually explicit material (Blais-Lecours et al., 2016; Wright & Bae, 2015), and adopt traditional sex roles, which suggest they should initiate and lead sexual relations.

Attachment-related avoidance. We found that individuals presenting with higher levels of attachment-related avoidance reported a greater use of seduction and a tendency to perceive their sexuality as less meaningful. The integration of these specific sexual messages seems consistent with Dewitte's (2012) suggestion that individuals who avoid intimacy tend to separate sexuality from love. It could also reflect their inclination to limit intimacy by engaging in sexual contacts without considering their relational implications (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). Researchers have indeed shown a positive association between attachment-related avoidance and acceptance of uncommitted sex (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Davis, Shaver, and Vernon (2004) also found that avoidant individuals tend to prioritize recreational aspects of sexuality, to prefer having multiple sexual partners, and to experience sexuality guided by physical pleasures rather than by a profound sense of meaning. Several authors justify these individuals' preference for impersonal sexuality by the intense fear of rejection and devastation experienced if their trust towards their partners are met by treason or abandonment (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Our results are also congruent with studies showing that individuals with higher attachment-related avoidance may have learned to rely solely on themselves, to deny their relational needs, and to exploit their relationships primarily for the benefits that they provide (e.g. satisfaction of sexual needs, social standing; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Schachner & Shaver, 2004).

Oversexualization and intimacy

Partially supporting our second hypothesis, our results revealed that emerging adults who endorsed oversexualized attitudes and behaviours were more likely to report lower levels of intimacy in their romantic relationships. An opposite pattern of results emerged however, for sexualized language and meaningfulness of sexuality.

Overinvestment in sexual appearance. We found that overinvestment in sexualized appearance was related to lower perceived sexual intimacy with one's partner. As suggested by Meltzer and McNulty (2010), the perceived failure to satisfy the ideals promoted by society could make young women feel

inadequate to the point that they may fear self-disclosure and emotionally committed behaviours in an intimate context. Shame and guilt resulting from the comparison between oneself and the unrealistic beauty standards (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007) may also weaken young adults' self-assertiveness towards their partner, therefore reducing their perceived level of intimacy in their relationship. In addition, constant preoccupations over one's body, appearance, and sexual attractiveness may have an adverse effect on sexual functioning among both women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and men (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007) through chronic body and physical appearance surveillance (Calogero & Thompson, 2009) and body preoccupations during sexual activities (e.g., Pujols, Meston, & Seal, 2010; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Steer & Tiggeman, 2008). Consequently, this could limit their sexual connection with their partners. Amongst men, but not women, we found that overinvestment in sexualized appearance was surprisingly related to *higher* perceived social intimacy (i.e., similarities in social networks, common friends). As investment in one's physical appearance is typically a feminine norm (Mahalik et al., 2005), it is possible that when men are sharing a particular interest in their own appearance, they feel more connected with their partners' interests and social network.

Sexual objectification. A negative association was found between sexual objectification and the perception of recreational intimacy in a romantic relationship, which is consistent with previous studies on objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Generally, using the body as an instrument to elicit others' appreciation and to accede to personal and social success, deprives it from its meaning (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification is therefore marked by the rejection of authenticity, since individuals think and perceive themselves through others' imaginary evaluations of their bodies (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). Such a disconnection with one's body could lead an individual to become a spectator in his or her life, and to experience less pleasurable activities with a partner.

Seductive attitude. Our results also revealed that the seductive attitude subscale was related to lower emotional intimacy. It is possible that seductive young adults seek excitement, novelty, and contacts within situations in which they are only able to reveal themselves on a superficial basis. These individuals may prefer to multiply the number of their conquests, instead of fostering more profound intimate relationships. Since intimacy is a dynamic process involving the slow exchange and sharing of experiences, transparency, and reciprocity (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Schaefer & Olson, 1981), seducing multiple partners is likely to interfere with individuals' ability to develop an emotional level of closeness.

Sexualized language. Although considerably small in terms of effect sizes, positive associations were found between sexualized language and four areas of intimacy: emotional, social, sexual, and recreational. This finding may seem surprising; it can be partly explained, however, by the sexual liberation of speech over the last 50 years, where sexual messages have become omnipresent and sexuality-related subjects are no

longer restricted to the realm of intimacy. One of the positive aspects of oversexualization, the tendency to use a sexualized language, may have replaced long-lasting taboos and allowed emerging adults to openly discuss sexuality, as highlighted by Brassard et al. (2016) in a sample of young adults. Many researchers have emphasized the fundamental importance of sexual communication in the sexual satisfaction of partners (e.g., Jones, Robinson, & Seedall, 2018). Although most oversexualized behaviours seem to interfere with the experience of intimacy, being able to discuss sexuality openly may represent an advantage when it comes to fostering relationship intimacy.

Meaningfulness of sexuality. Lastly, our study found strong positive associations between meaningfulness of sexuality (opposite of oversexualization) and perceived levels of romantic intimacy in all five areas. In other words, young adults who perceived sexuality as a respectful, meaningful, and intimate act within a committed relationship, tended to subjectively experience higher degrees of intimacy in their romantic relationships. Conversely, young adults who preferred to engage in recreational sexuality—or sex without commitment—reported lower degrees of intimacy. These original findings suggest that valuing sexuality in the context of an intimate and committed relationship may lead to behaviours that foster the development of intimacy within the relationship (e.g., disclosing, listening, respect), both on a sexual and emotional level. This is also consistent with Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham (2010) finding that risky sexual behaviours (e.g., unprotected sexual contacts with multiple partners) are related to lower levels of intimacy.

Implications and Limitations

This study makes an original contribution to the literature, by highlighting the role of attachment insecurities in young adults' vulnerability to social pressures and sexual stereotypes. Our findings also revealed how oversexualized behaviours and attitudes can potentially hinder romantic intimacy, with the exception of the small benefit of adopting a sexualized language. Developing a dialogue centered on affective experiences, identity exploration, and authentic sexual choices seems to be a promising avenue to address the relational costs of oversexualization. This study relied on a large sample of emerging adults, extending the understanding of social sexualization beyond adolescence, for both men and women. The psychometric qualities of the measures and the rigorous analyses support the validity of the findings. Moreover, the theoretical framework of attachment theory allowed for an understanding of oversexualization through an empirically validated model.

It is important to note however, that our research was an exploratory correlational study (cross-sectional), which does not allow for causal explanations. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the nature of the associations between oversexualization, romantic attachment, and intimacy. Self-report questionnaires may have generated biases (social desirability, self-awareness), although a social desirability scale was included. Future research would benefit from the use of different data collection methods (e.g., observational measures,

daily dairies), as well as qualitative interviews. Dyadic studies would be valuable in providing a better description of partners' dynamics, considering that both partners contribute to the sexual and relational functioning of the couple. The overrepresentation of heterosexual women from Quebec within our sample may limit the generalization of the study's results. Although we tried to diversify the sample in terms of occupation, most participants (76%) were college students. Future research should target more representative samples to increase generalizability. The study of oversexualization could also benefit from an exploration of additional protective or risk factors (e.g., pornography, childhood trauma, alcohol or drug consumption), as well as elements pertaining the couple dynamics (e.g., couple communication, commitment, satisfaction). Exploring the mediating role of oversexualization in the relationship between attachment and sexual functioning would also be an interesting avenue, contributing to the advancement of our knowledge on this association.

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