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A linkage study investigating sexualized self-presentation on mobile dating apps and user traits

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ABSTRACT

Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs) are integral to young adults' lives, serving as a platform for romantic and sexual self-presentation during the search for potential partners. Despite its potential link to adverse outcomes including body shame, the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation remains understudied. This pre-registered linkage study addresses this gap by documenting sexualized self-presentation while considering individual differences related to gender, sexual orientation, and body image. Young adults donated MDA (Tinder, Bumble) profile screenshots ($n_{biographies}$ = 443, $n_{pictures}$ = 1277; M_{age} = 23.15, SD = 2.94; 72.20 % women). Of those 443 participants, 237 additionally completed a body image linkage survey (M_{age} = 23.36, SD = 2.90; 71.30 % women). Sexualized self-presentation appeared in 4.30 % of biographies and 56.80 % of profile pictures, mainly through sexualized facial expressions. Women, non-heterosexual users, and those holding a more negative body image engaged more in sexualized self-presentation. Platform type and positive body image indicators did not relate to engagement in sexualized self-presentation. Future research is recommended to explore whether the extensive presence of sexualized self-presentations on MDAs impacts users' personal and relational well-being.

1. Introduction

Recently, Mobile Dating Applications (henceforth: MDAs) have surged in popularity among young adults, offering new opportunities for presenting oneself as a potential romantic or sexual partner (Sumter et al., 2017). While scholarly attention to these platforms has grown, most studies focus solely on usage frequency, neglecting users' agency in self-presentation (Konings et al., 2022). Drawing on the Hyper-personal Model of Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC; Walther, 2007) and the Dramaturgical Model of Social Interaction (DMSI; Goffman, 1959), MDA users are expected to carefully craft their online persona to make a positive impression on potential partners with sexual attractiveness often being an important characteristic (Fisher, 2008). Specifically, the Task Force of the American Psychological Association (2007) posits that sexualization occurs if any of the following indications is present; "(1) when a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior to the exclusion of other characteristics, (2) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy, (3) a person is sexually objectified- that is, made into a thing for other's sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or (4) sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person" (p. 1). Individuals may internalize the importance of being sexually attractive and hence, apply the assumptions of sexualization on themselves. Self-sexualization can also be enacted in behaviors to appear more sexually appealing (e.g., wearing little or revealing clothing; Smolak et al., 2014; Van Oosten, 2018). Despite the evidence of negative consequences of self-sexualization, e.g., body shame (Choi et al., 2023), its prevalence on MDAs remains underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation on MDAs, while taking into account individual differences according to users' gender, sexual orientation, MDA platform used and correlates of a negative and/or positive body image (BI).

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1.1. Intensified sexualized self-presentation in mobile dating

1.1.1. The affordances of mobile dating and selective self-presentation

MDAs are smartphone applications designed for connecting users with potential romantic or sexual partners using GPS technology (Sumter et al., 2017). With approximately 270 million global users, mainly aged 18 to 34 (Curry, 2022), MDAs have surpassed traditional methods of meeting potential partners like introductions by friends or family (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). While MDAs share features with general social media (e.g., Instagram) and online dating (e.g., dating websites), they have unique characteristics. They provide a vast pool of nearby matches based on location and enable users to quickly assess potential partners through pictures and brief biographies, requiring minimal cognitive effort (Konings et al., 2022). Moreover, the asynchronous nature of communication on MDAs allows for highly customizable interactions. Drawing from the Hyper-Personal Model of CMC (Walther, 2007), users can carefully craft their online persona, emphasizing positive traits and filtering out negative information. This selective self-presentation is important on MDAs, where profiles serve as gatekeepers for interactions (Van der Zanden et al., 2022).

1.1.2. The targeted (imagined) audiences in mobile dating

Individuals tailor their self-presentation based on their target (imagined) audience (Goffman, 1959). While on general social media platforms individuals encounter diverse audiences, on MDAs individuals present themselves to unknown others who could potentially become romantic or sexual partners (Goffman, 1959). This difference in audience prompts varied self-presentation strategies, with individuals aiming to be likable and avoid rejection or stigma (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Goffman, 1959). In dating contexts, self-presentation is further shaped by the desire for romantic or sexual success (Ha et al., 2010. Toma & Hancock, 2010). Research suggests that individuals seeking romantic or sexual partners prioritize physical sexual attractiveness (Fisher et al., 2008). This may manifest in behaviors aimed at enhancing sexual appeal (e.g., wearing little or revealing clothing, Smolak et al., 2014; Van Oosten, 2018). A better understanding of the prevalence of sexualized practices on the most widely used MDAs (e.g., Tinder, Bumble) is crucial, as it may heighten individuals' sexualized self-concepts (e.g., Valkenburg, 2017), potentially leading to adverse outcomes for their well-being (e.g., body shame; Choi et al., 2023).

1.2. Individual and platform differences in sexualized self-presentation

The level of sexualized self-presentation on MDAs is influenced by individual traits such as gender and sexual orientation, as well as the specific MDA platform used. First, as compared to men, women emphasize sexual attractiveness more often (Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012) and are more inclined to present themselves in a sexualized manner to align with traditional gender norms (Smolak et al., 2014; Trekels et al., 2018). Second, sexual orientation impacts the importance individuals attach to physical attractiveness in potential partners. For example, physical appearance seems less important in the partner selection of non-heterosexual women compared to heterosexual women (VanderLaan & Vasey, 2008). Potentially the mate value of physical (sexual) attractiveness might be internalized to different extents by (non-)hetero (wo)men, and subsequently, mirrored to different extents in their self-presentation. Third, MDAs offer unique interfaces and norms that shape user practices (Vanherle & Beullens, 2023). For instance, Tinder and Bumble, two popular MDAs exhibit both similarities and differences in their interfaces. On Tinder, both genders can initiate conversations, while on Bumble, only women can take the first step. Additionally, platform-specific norms influence how users present themselves. Tinder is believed to reinforce traditional heteronormative ideals (e.g., Duguay, 2017), while Bumble seeks to challenge these norms by disrupting conventional dating dynamics (Bumble, 2024). Consequently, Tinder seems to foster a more sexualized environment, emphasizing more physical attractiveness, whereas Bumble prioritizes personality over sexual appeal (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021).

1.3. Links between sexualized self-presentation and users' BI

Sexualization has been a focal point in body image (BI) research, drawing from theories like objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and the objectified body consciousness framework (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). These theories illuminate how treating one's own body as a (sexual) object (i.e., self-sexualization) correlates with an individual's BI. Specifically, individuals prone to self-sexualization tend to internalize narrow appearance ideals (e.g., the belief that a thin/-muscular physique is crucial; Schaefer et al., 2015; Trekels et al., 2018), engage in body surveillance (i.e., constant monitoring of appearance; Moradi & Varnes, 2017), experiencing body shame (i.e., negative feelings stemming from a gap between their actual and idealized bodies; Choi et al., 2023), and report appearance dissatisfaction (i.e., negative evaluation of their body/face compared to an idealized image; Slade et al., 1990; Ward, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to explore whether the aforementioned correlates of a negative BI (i.e., internalization of narrow appearance ideals, body surveillance, body shame, appearance dissatisfaction) may be linked to engagement in sexualized self-presentation on MDAs.

Scholars emphasize that positive BI differs qualitatively from negative BI and warrants independent study (Maes et al., 2023; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Positive BI involves feelings of love, care, and respect for one's body, as well as the acceptance of bodily imperfections (i.e., body appreciation; Alleva et al., 2016). It also entails broader views of beauty and resistance to narrow appearance ideals (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016). However, the link between positive BI and engagement in sexualized self-presentation remains poorly understood. Some studies suggest individuals may engage in such behavior not only for other's pleasure but also as a form of personal empowerment through sexual expression (Choi et al., 2023). Specifically, these empowered individuals embrace their sexual agency (Liss et al., 2011), and hence positive BI might relate to increased sexualized self-presentation. Conversely, others argue that empowered individuals resist dominant appearance practices, resulting in less involvement in sexualized behaviors (de Lenne et al., 2022).

1.4. Study aims

Based on the research discussed above it could be argued that the sexualized self-presentation would be prevalent on mobile dating platform due to factors like reduced cues (Walther, 2007) and target audience considerations (e.g., Goffman, 1959). However, there is a lack of documentation regarding how users present themselves on these platforms. Additionally, research indicates potential differences in self-presentation based on gender (e.g., Trekels et al., 2018), sexual orientation (e.g., Lippa, 2007), and platform type (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021), yet these individual differences have not been explored in the context of MDAs. Moreover, there are inconsistencies in how BI correlates with engagement in sexualized self-presentation, with some suggesting a link between negative BI and self-sexualization (e.g., Moradi & Varnes, 2017), while others propose a connection between positive BI and empowerment-driven self-sexualization (Liss et al., 2011). To address these gaps, this study aimed to investigate the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation on MDAs and to explore individual differences based on gender, sexual orientation, and MDA platform choice. Additionally, it sought to examine the relationship between BI and engagement in sexualized self-presentation. Three research questions were formulated:

RQ1. : To what extent do MDA users present themselves in a sexualized manner in their visual and textual MDA profile cues?

RQ2. : To what extent do MDA users' (a) gender, (b) sexual orientation and (c) type of MDA relate to engagement in sexualized self-presentation in their visual and textual MDA profile cues?

RQ3a. : To what extent do correlates of a negative BI (i.e., internalization of appearance ideals, body surveillance, body shame, appearance dissatisfaction) relate to engagement in sexualized self-presentation in MDA users' visual and textual MDA profile cues?

RQ3b. : To what extent do correlates of a positive BI (i.e., body appreciation, broad conceptualizations of beauty) relate to engagement in sexualized self-presentation in MDA users' visual and textual MDA profile cues?

2. Method

2.1. Sample description

This data donation linkage study was approved by the [university blinded for review] Ethical Review Board and a pre-data collection registration was created in OSF.[1] Between April and August 2022, 18–30-years-olds were recruited through social media advertisements as well as offline (e.g., railway stations). Participants were assured that their data would be treated confidentially and gave active informed consent.

Participants shared digital trace data (i.e., records of digital activity) by uploading screenshots of their MDA profiles. Such data donation offers users enhanced transparency in which personal information they are sharing (Ohme et al., 2024). Each participant who donated screenshots was rewarded with a five-euro gift card. In total, 443 participants shared screenshots of their MDA profiles, of which 67.50 % (n = 299) and 32.50 % (n = 144) were currently using respectively Tinder or Bumble.[4] The content analytical sample consisted of 443 biographies and 1277 profile pictures.[5] On average, participants were 23.15 years old (SD = 2.94, $n_{ciswomen}$ = 72.20 %). In total 34.80 % identified as being not exclusively heterosexual and 95.70 % indicated to have a Western-European ethnicity.[6] A proportion of the participants (n = 237; 53.38 %) who donated their screenshots, completed a BI linkage survey.[7] For these participants, observed digital trace data was linked to their self-report in the second linkage analytical part of this study, M_{age} = 23.36, SD = 2.90, $n_{ciswomen}$ = 71.30 %, $n_{non\text{-}hetero}$ = 35 %, $n_{Western\text{-}european}$ = 95.80 %, n_{Tinder} = 64.60 %.

2.2. Content analysis

2.2.1. Coding procedure

First, a codebook[8] was developed to identify sexualized self-presentation strategies in MDA profiles. The operationalization of these strategies was based on pre-existing conceptualizations of sexualization (e.g., Yan et al., 2022). Two types of profile content were coded, namely, (1) the visual content displaying the profile owner (i.e., profile pictures) and (2) the textual content (i.e., biographies). Screenshots of the participants' profiles were divided among two trained coders and the first author of this study. During the coders' training, the clarity of the codebook was evaluated to minimize ambiguous interpretations. The final codebook for this study included 11 main codes; four codes for the textual cues and seven for the visual cues.

To assess inter-coder reliability, all coders independently coded 10.57 % of MDA profile pictures (n = 135) and 11.29 % of MDA biographies (n = 50) before the entire analytical sample of screenshots was coded. Krippendorff's alpha indicated a good reliability for both the textual (α = .71–1.00) and visual profile cues (α = .68–1.00). A more in-depth overview of the interrater reliability for each separate code is available in Table 1.

2.2.2. Coding themes

2.2.2.1. General profile cues. As for general textual profile cues, the presence of a biography was coded (0 = *absent*, 1 = *present*). For the general visual profile cues, the total number of profile pictures were coded and the type of picture (1 = *selfie,* 2 = *picture taken by someone else,* 3 = *mirror picture,* 4 = *other*) was coded.

2.2.2.1.1. Textual profile cues. For the textual profile cues, sexualized self-presentation was coded through four pre-defined elements of sexualization as outlined in Table 1. An overall profile score to capture the extent of engagement in textual sexualized self-presentation was created by transforming the four indicators into a sum score (min = 0, max = 4; M =.05, SD =.22).

2.2.2.1.2. Visual profile cues. Visual sexualized self-presentation was determined by coding pre-defined indicators of sexualization as outlined in Table 1. Next, a profile picture score capturing the extent of engagement in sexualized self-presentation in the visual profile cues was created by transforming the seven dichotomous indicators into a sum score for each profile picture (min = 0, max = 5; M = 1.00, SD = 1.12). As participants differed in the number of profile pictures shared, an overall profile score for the extent of engagement in visual sexualized self-presentation was created by averaging participant's self-sexualization scores across their profile pictures. See OSF[9] for a summary of the variable transformations.

2.3. Self-report measures

2.3.1. Socio-demographic variables

Age, sex assigned at birth (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*), gender identity (*I identify* 1 = *(mainly) as man*, 2 = *(mainly) as woman*, 3 = *neither as man nor as woman,* 4 = *sometimes as man, sometimes as woman,* 5 = *I don't know*), sexual orientation (*I am attracted to* 1 = *men,* 2 = *mainly men, but also to women,* 3 = *equally as much to men as to women,* 4 = *mainly women, but also to men,* 5 = *women,* 6 = *I prefer not to say*) and ethnicity (1 = *Western-European,* 2 = *Eastern-European,* 3 = *African or Middle-Eastern,* 4 = *North-American,* 5 = *South-American,* 6 = *Asian,* 7 = *other,* 8 = *I don't know*) were questioned. For analytical purposes, sex assigned at birth was considered in combination with gender identity to select cisgender individuals (i.e., person whose gender identity corresponds with their biological sex).[2] Henceforth, the dichotomous variable gender was used to refer to cismen (=0) and ciswomen (=1). Additionally, sexual orientation was transformed into a dichotomous variable (0 = *heterosexual*, 1 = *non-heterosexual*). Socio-demographic variables were questioned for all participants (n = 443).

[1] https://osf.io/aqyx3/?view_only=c3bd0d8de76c420fa5ebbfd767898da0

[4] For the users that were simultaneously using Tinder and Bumble, the Bumble profile was retained to enhance comparability between the platforms, as the number of Tinder users was overrepresented.

[5] Note that on Tinder, users can upload up to nine pictures and on Bumble up to six pictures. For 172 profiles (38.80 %), all pictures were coded. Yet, for feasibility reasons a maximum of three pictures (in chronological order) of the subsequent profiles were coded.

[6] For Tinder: M_{age} = 22.68, SD_{age} = 2.76, $N_{ciswomen}$= 72.60 %, $N_{non\text{-}hetero}$ = 34.40 %, $N_{West\text{-}European}$ = 95.90 %; For Bumble: M_{age} = 24.13, SD_{age} = .72, $N_{ciswomen}$= 71.50 %, $N_{non\text{-}hetero}$ = 35.70 %, $N_{West\text{-}European}$ = 95.30 %

[7] Note that the full sample was not invited to participate in this survey to avoid survey fatigue: these participants took part in a different survey.

[8] https://osf.io/aqyx3/?view_only=c3bd0d8de76c420fa5ebbfd767898da0

[9] https://osf.io/s2gwk/?view_only= 61967a8009d940f2be44b46d9dc55b3d

Table 1
Overview of coded indicators and inter-rater reliability for textual(biography) and visual (pictures) sexualized self-presentation.

Users' Sexualized Self-presentation						
	Indicators	Definition	Examples	Original coding	Recoding	Inter-rater reliability
Biography	1. Sex reference (Yan et al., 2022)	Suggested sexual activity via words or emoticons	Emoticons of banana, eggplant, peach, tongue, water splashes;"50 shades", "save a horse, ride a cowgirl"	0 = absent 1 = present 98 = NA 99 = missing	/	α = .77
	2. Sexualization reference (Yan et al., 2022)	Emphasis on sexiness; profile owner presents oneself as sexual object	"notice my thighs", "I am a sexual person", reference to own penis/breasts/buttocks	Count variable	1-max score → 1 = present, 0 → 0 = absent	α = .79
	3. Sex position (Zhao et al., 2008)	Profile owner refers to which sexual position they prefer	"bottom", "top", "versatile"	0 = absent 1 = present 98 = NA 99 = missing	/	α = .77
	4. Casual sex motivation (Sumter et al., 2017)	Explicit or implicit reference to casual sex motivation for using MDAs	"friends with benefits", "one-night stand", "quick fun", "nothing serious"	0 = absent 1 = present 98 = NA 99 = missing	/	α = .74
Profile Pictures	1. Revealing clothing (Yan et al., 2022)	The extent to which the profile owner is wearing revealing clothing	Not revealing, slightly revealing (e.g., tank tops, dresses close to mid-thigh lengths, clothing with minimal cleavage/exposed shoulders), somewhat revealing (e.g., tube tops, clothing with slightly exposed midriffs), highly revealing (e.g., dresses with deep necklines, skin-tight clothing, sheer fabric clothing), extremely reveling (e.g., swimwear/lingerie)	1 = not revealing 2 = slightly revealing 3 = somewhat revealing 4 = highly revealing 5 = extremely revealing, yet swimwear 6 = extremely revealing, yet lingerie	4 −6 → 1 = present1 −3 → 0 = absent	α = .99
	2. Sexualized body parts (Yan et al., 2022)	Visibility and emphasis on sexualized body parts	Clear emphasis on cleavage/chest/abs/ buttocks	0 = no sexualization, 1 = slight sexualization, 2 = high sexualization	1 −2 → 1 = present0 → 0 = absent	α = .97
	3. Sexualized body pose (Hatton & Trautner, 2011)	The extent to which profile owner is posing in a way related to sexual activity	Sitting with legs spread wide open, lying down	0 = no sexualization, 1 = slight sexualization, 2 = high sexualization	1 −2 → 1 = present0 → 0 = absent	α = .68
	4. Sexualized self-touch (Yan, 2022)	The extent to which profile owner touches themselves in a sexualized manner	Hands actively touching oneself in suggestive ways such as touches near breasts/chest, buttocks, genitals	0 = absent, 1 = casual/ambiguous touch 2 = explicit self-touch	2 → 1 = present0 −1 → 0 = absent	α = .98
	5. Sexualized other-touch (Yan, 2022)	The extent to which profile owner touches someone else in a sexualized manner	Kissing someone	0 = absent, 1 = affiliative or ambiguous touches, 2 = sexual touch with others	2 → 1 = present0 −1 → 0 = absent	α = .74
	6. Sexualized role play (Yan, 2022)	The profile owner engages in sexual role play in the picture	Infantilization/child-like clothes or bondage/domination	0 = absent 1 = present 98 = NA 99 = missing	/	α = 1.00
	7. Sexualized face (Yan et al., 2022)	The extent to which profile owner has a sexualized facial expression based on their eyes/mouth/head position	Winking, sultry/hooded/half-open eyes, duck faces, tongues showing, mouths slightly open but not smiling or talking, tilting head suggestively to the camera	Count variable	1-max score → 1 = present, 0 → 0 = absent	α = .70

2.3.2. *Negative BI*

2.3.2.1. Internalization of appearance ideals. The gender specific subscales Internalization: Thin/Low Body Fat (e.g., "I think a lot about looking thin") and Internalization: Muscular/Athletic (e.g., "I think a lot about looking muscular") of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-4 (Schaefer et al., 2015) were used. Participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*). For ciswomen, a PCA with direct oblimin rotation yielded a one-factor structure, representing three items with an eigenvalue greater than 1, explaining 68.68 % of the variance. A variable was created 'Thin internalization' (α = .73, *M* = 3.97, *SD* = 1.48). Next, for cismen, a PCA with direct oblimin rotation yielded a one-factor structure, representing four items with an eigenvalue greater than 1, explaining 79.30 % of the variance. A variable was created 'Muscular internalization' (α = .95, *M* = 4.35, *SD* = 1.54). The gender-specific scores were then merged into a single variable 'internalization of appearance ideals,' which acknowledged the gendered nature of these ideals. Specifically, men received a score on 'Muscular internalization,' and women received a score on 'Thin internalization'. Higher scores on this variable indicated greater internalization of gender-specific appearance ideals (*M* = 4.08, *SD* = 1.50).

2.3.2.2. Body surveillance and body shame. The subscales Body Surveillance (e.g., "during the day, I think about how I look many times") and Body Shame (e.g., "I feel ashamed of myself when I haven't made an effort to look my best") of the Abbreviated Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (Moradi & Varnes, 2017) were used. Participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*). Reverse worded items were rescaled. A PCA with direct oblimin rotation, yielded a two-factor forced structure, representing 16 items with an eigenvalue greater than 1, explaining 48.1 % of the variance. Two variables were created: body surveillance (α = .68, *M* = 3.87, *SD* = 0.83) and body shame (α = .83, *M* = 3.58, *SD* = 1.20).

Table 2
Prevalence indicators of sexualization in textual and visual MDA profile cues.

Sexualization		Frequency	Percentage
Textual MDA profile cues	General	19	4.30 %
	Suggesting sexual activity (e.g.,	10	2.30 %
	Reference to own sexualized body parts	3	0.70 %
	Casual sex motivation	7	1.60 %
	Reference to sex position	0	0.00 %
Visual MDA profile cues	General	725	56.80 %
	Revealing clothing	52	4.10 %
	Emphasizing sexualized body parts	227	17.80 %
	Sexualized body pose	369	28.90 %
	Sexual role play	2	0.20 %
	Sexualized facial expression[a]	524	41.00 %
	Sexualized self-touch	0	0.00 %
	Sexualized other-touch	0	0.00 %

[a] Additional analyses revealed that sexualized faces were mainly present in pictures that were taken by someone else (n = 220; 17.30 %) and in selfies (n = 204; 16.00 %), but far less present in pictures taken in a mirror (n = 91; 7.10 %)

Higher scores indicated greater body surveillance or body shame.

2.3.2.3. Appearance dissatisfaction. The Head Satisfaction and Body Satisfaction subscales of the Body Satisfaction Scale (Slade et al., 1990) were used. For Head Satisfaction, participants rated how satisfied they were with six items relating to their head (above the neck) from 1 (= *very unsatisfied*) to 7 (= *very satisfied*). For Body Satisfaction, participants rated seven items relating to their body (below the neck) from 1 (= *very unsatisfied*) to 7 (= *very satisfied*). A PCA with direct oblimin rotation yielded a two-factor forced structure, representing 13 items with an eigenvalue greater than 1, explaining 41.40 % of the variance. Two variables were created by subtracting the scores of head satisfaction and body satisfaction from the maximum score (7), resulting in face dissatisfaction (α = .71, M = 1.98, SD = 0.90) and body dissatisfaction (α = .73, M = 2.45, SD = 1.02), with higher scores reflecting greater dissatisfaction.

2.3.3. Positive BI

2.3.3.1. Body appreciation. The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (Alleva et al., 2016) was used. Participants rated ten items (e.g., "I respect my body") from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*). A PCA yielded a one-factor structure with an eigenvalue greater than 1, explaining 66.12 % of the variance. A new variable was created with higher scores reflecting greater body appreciation (α = .94, M = 4.64, SD = 1.20).

2.3.3.2. Broad conceptualizations of beauty (BCOB). An adapted version of the Broad Conceptualization of Beauty Scale (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016) was used. The original scale items tailored to women (were adjusted to apply to both men and women (e.g., "I think that a wide variety of body shapes are beautiful") and an additional item was introduced: "I think that muscular men are more handsome than men who have other body types" as counterpart for the original item: "I think that thin women are more beautiful than women who have other body types". Participants rated ten items from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 7 (= *strongly agree*). A PCA yielded a one-factor forced[10] structure with an eigenvalue greater than 1, explaining 40.19 % of the variance. A new variable was created with higher scores reflecting broader conceptualizations of beauty (α = .65, M = 4.39, SD = 0.60).

2.4. Analytical approach

Data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0.1.0. The overall profile scores on sexualized self-presentation, i.e., sexualized textual cues (sum score) and sexualized visual cues (mean score), were used as outcome variables in all analyses. For RQ1-RQ2, data of all participants who shared their screenshots were used (n = 433). For RQ3, self-reports of participants who completed the BI linkage survey were linked to the coded profile data (n = 237).

To answer RQ1, descriptive statistics assessed the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation. For RQ2, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) examined the differences in the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation in textual and visual MDA profile cues, according to participants' gender, sexual orientation, and platform type. Interactions between gender, sexual orientation, and platform type were also assessed. Next, for RQ3a and RQ3b, zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics were calculated.[11]

3. Results

3.1. Content analysis findings

3.1.1. The prevalence of sexualized self-presentation in MDA Users' textual and visual profile cues (RQ1)

Regarding textual cues, most profiles included a biography (n = 437, 98.60 %). In 4.30 % (n = 19) of biographies, at least one of the four predefined textual sexualized self-presentation indicators was present (M =.05, SD =.22; min = 0, max = 2). Regarding the visual cues (n = 1277), participants included five profile pictures in their MDA profile on average (M = 4.90, SD = 1.33). Most pictures were taken by someone else (66.60 %), A quarter of pictures (24.00 %) were selfies, and 8.90 % of the pictures were taken in a mirror. Pictures where the profile owner was not visible (e.g., picture of their cat; 0.50 %) were less prevalent. In 56.80 % (n = 725) of the pictures, at least one of the seven visual indicators of sexualized self-presentation was present (M = 1.00, SD = 1.12; min = 0, max = 5). See Table 2 for an overview of which indicators of sexualization were prevalent in textual and visual MDA profile cues.

When considering the average profile sores of visual sexualization across all pictures, results showed that out of the 443 profiles, 261 (58.92 %) included at least one indicator of visual sexualization, of which 13 profiles (2.93 %) simultaneously included at least one indicator of textual sexualization in their biographies.

[10] In line with the original scale development article, a forced one-component analysis was conducted.

[11] All analyses were pre-registered and can be accessed on OSF: https://osf.io/s2gwk/?view_only= 61967a8009d940f2be44b46d9dc55b3d

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations.

	M	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9
1. Textual sexualization	.05	.23	-								
2. Visual sexualization	.17	.18	−.01	-							
3. Internalization appearance ideals	4.08	1.50	.01	.06	-						
4. Face dissatisfaction	1.98	0.90	−.04	.15*	.26***	-					
5. Body dissatisfaction	2.45	1.02	−.02	.08	.20**	.50***	-				
6. Body surveillance	3.84	0.83	.07	.16*	.33***	.33***	.41***	-			
7. Body shame	3.58	1.20	−.10	.16*	.37***	.33***	.61***	.59***	-		
8. Body appreciation	4.64	1.19	.03	−.11	−.28 * **	−.46 * **	−.71 * **	−.53 * **	−.66 * **	-	
9. Broad conceptualizations of beauty	4.38	0.60	.01	.08	−.23 * **	−.22 * **	−.20 * *	−.12	−.13	.21**	

Note. Textual sexualization = sum profile score for sexualization in textual cues, visual sexualization = mean profile score for sexualization in visual cues, accounted for number of pictures within a profile. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

3.2. Linkage analysis findings

3.2.1. Gender, sexual orientation, platform type and sexualized self-presentation (RQ2)

The MANOVA showed significant group differences by gender, Pillai's Trace = .06, $F(2, 423) = 13.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and by sexual orientation, Pillai's Trace = .02, $F(2, 423) = 3.23$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ in the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation in textual and/or visual MDA profile cues. No significant differences were found by platform type, Pillai's Trace = .01, $F(2, 423) = 1.31$, $p = .27$, $\eta p^2 = .01$. No significant interactions between gender and sexual orientation, Pillai's Trace = .00, $F(2, 423) = .30$, $p = .74$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$; gender and platform type, Pillai's Trace = .01, $F(2, 423) = 1.40$, $p = .25$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; nor between sexual orientation and platform type, Pillai's Trace = .00, $F(2, 423) = .61$, $p = .55$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$ were found.

3.2.1.1. Textual profile cues. For textual cues, pairwise comparisons showed no significant gender differences, $F(1, 424) = .40$, $p = .53$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, but there were significant sexual orientation differences. $F(1, 424) = 6.21$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Non-heterosexual users, $M = .09$, $SD = .29$, were more likely to engage in sexualized self-presentation as compared to heterosexual users, $M = .02$, $SD = .17$.

3.2.1.2. Visual profile cues. For visual cues, pairwise comparisons showed significant gender differences, $F(1, 424) = 25.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .06$. Women were more likely to engage in sexualized self-presentation, $M = .18$, $SD = .16$, compared to men, $M = .08$, $SD = .13$. Pairwise comparisons further showed no significant differences according to users' sexual orientation, $F(1, 424) = .17$, $p = .68$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$.

3.2.2. Correlates of negative/positive BI and sexualized self-presentation (RQ3a and b)

Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics are provided in Table 3. None of the correlates of negative or positive BI significantly related to sexualization in textual cues. As for the visual cues, none of the correlates of positive BI related significantly, whereas of the correlates of negative BI, i.e., face dissatisfaction ($r = .15$, $p = .02$), body surveillance ($r = .16$, $p = .01$) and body shame ($r = .16$, $p = .01$), significantly and positively related to visual sexualization. The higher individuals scored on face dissatisfaction, body surveillance and body shame, the more likely they were to engage in visual sexualized self-presentation.

4. Discussion

Mobile dating applications (MDAs) have become a predominant method for seeking romantic partners (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Research on CMC (e.g., Walther, 2007) and dating dynamics (e.g., Ha et al., 2010) suggests that individuals tend to enhance their self-presentation in digital environments, particularly when interacting romantically. Such romantic self-presentations often reflect traditional mate values, such as sexual attractiveness, in offline contexts (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008). This study aimed to investigate the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation in MDA profiles (RQ1) and to examine individual differences among those who engage in it (RQ2–3).

4.1. The prevalence of sexualized self-presentation in MDA users' textual and visual profile cues (RQ1)

Out of the 443 biographies and 1277 profile pictures examined, over half (58.92 %) of MDA users displayed some level of sexualized self-presentation in their profiles. This indicates a tendency among MDA users to highlight their sexual attractiveness when communicating to potential partners. This finding suggests that aspects of the Hyperpersonal Model of CMC (Walther, 2007) and the DMSI (Goffman, 1959) may apply, at least partially, to mobile dating. More specifically, indicators of sexualized self-presentation were found in 4.30 % of biographies and 56.80 % of profile pictures. Textual cues mainly suggested sexual activity, while visual cues primarily featured users with a sexual facial expression. This emphasis on sexualized imagery in profile pictures may be attributed to the visual-centric design of MDAs (Yeo & Fung, 2018). Previous research by Van der Zanden et al. (2022) revealed that profile pictures receive more initial attention than biographies on MDAs, with attractive pictures garnering even more focus. Therefore, profile pictures, especially the initial ones, likely serve as gatekeepers for further profile evaluation, prioritizing the inclusion of attractive images over compelling biographies.

The prevalence of sexualized facial expressions in self-presentation on MDAs may be attributed to cultural dating norms in Western societies, which value a degree of sexual attractiveness without crossing into excessive sexiness. This is in line with prior research suggesting that although young people want to be seen as sexy and sexually attractive, they refrain from sharing images that are excessively sexual or expose too much of their bodies online (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Potentially, individuals may also be aware of the negative perceptions associated with highly sexualized self-presentation, such as being viewed as less competent or attractive (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016).

4.2. Gender, sexual orientation, platform type and sexualized self-presentation (RQ2)

Results revealed significant differences in sexualized self-presentation based on users' sexual orientation and gender, though not platform type. Non-heterosexual users were more inclined to incorporate sexualized cues in their textual profiles compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This trend suggests that non-heterosexual individuals may use MDAs more for sexual exploration and/or expression. To contextualize this potential explanation, we conducted an additional exploratory analysis which revealed that non-heterosexual individuals referred significantly more to a casual sex motive in their

profile biographies as compared to heterosexual individuals.[12]

Furthermore, women engaged more in visual sexualized self-presentation than men, consistent with findings by Vranken et al. (2024), indicating women emphasize their physical attractiveness in profile pictures more so than men. This observation supports previous research suggesting gender differences in mate value prioritization, particularly in terms of physical (sexual) attractiveness (Ward, 2016). It is plausible that women are socialized to place greater importance on being sexually attractive, aligning with literature on sexualization. This body of work suggests a historical trend of portraying women as sexual objects, emphasizing physical appearance and sexual appeal, potentially conveying the idea that women must present themselves as sexual objects for others' gratification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Ward, 2016). However, engaging in sexualized self-presentation could also be seen as a form of empowerment, particularly for women (e.g., Liss et al., 2011). Historically, sexualization has often been imposed on women, reducing them to mere objects of sexual gratification (e.g., Ward, 2016). Given that MDAs offer users the opportunity to present themselves as potential romantic or sexual partners, they arguably grant individuals more agency in shaping how they wish to be perceived. Consequently, individuals might choose to portray part of themselves as sexual beings, expressing their intrinsic desire to embrace their sexuality on their own terms, rather than presenting themselves solely as objects of sexual desire, conforming to others' external standards of sexual attractiveness. Considering that this study indicates that most MDA users engaged in rather 'mild' forms of sexualized self-presentation, it is plausible that these more subtle expressions of sexuality (e.g., sexualized facial expressions) are within the profile owner's comfort zone, suggesting their sexual identity without making it the sole focal point of their persona. Future research is encouraged to disentangle these underlying motivations for engagement in sexualized self-presentation on MDAs in more depth.

4.3. Correlates of negative/positive body image and sexualized self-presentation (RQ3)

Regarding the correlates of negative BI, results indicated that higher levels of face dissatisfaction, body surveillance, and body shame were associated with increased engagement in sexualized self-presentation in users' profile pictures. These findings align with existing literature on BI, suggesting that negative correlates of BI are linked to greater self-sexualization (e.g., Choi et al., 2023; Moradi & Varnes, 2017). This tendency might be driven by the search - and need- for external validation for their physical attractiveness, possibly at the cost of other characteristics (e.g., personality, capabilities).

Our findings suggest that MDA users predominantly self-sexualize through facial expressions (RQ1), supporting previous research indicating that individuals with greater body surveillance and body shame may be more reluctant to self-sexualize in their bodily features (e.g., Schettino et al., 2023). Consequently, due to elevated body shame and body surveillance, they may be more inclined to accentuate their sexual attractiveness through facial expressions.

While limited research exists on the link between face dissatisfaction and engaging in sexualized self-presentation, our finding that face dissatisfaction is associated with increased sexualized self-presentation, primarily through facial expressions, is somewhat unexpected. Previous studies have linked facial dissatisfaction to selfie-editing behaviors (e.g., Sun, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Thus, considering the Hyper-personal Model of CMC (Walther, 2007) and the DMSI (Goffman, 1959), individuals with greater face dissatisfaction may be particularly inclined to craft an 'ideal sexy self' in their facial expressions within the context of mobile dating. Future research could investigate how facial dissatisfaction correlates with the use of edited sexualized faces (e.g., filters) in MDA profile pictures.

4.4. Limitations, directions for future research, and implications

The results should be interpreted in light of some limitations, offering directions for future research. First, while our findings suggest that MDA users prioritize visual over textual cues for sexualized self-presentation, we did not directly inquire about users' perceptions of the importance of different profile elements in forming impressions. Future studies could investigate whether users themselves view profile pictures as more important than biographies for attracting potential partners.

Second, although this study introduced a novel user-centric approach to data collection by gathering screenshots of users' MDA profiles, the results may not fully represent the target population. While users have greater control over what they share with researchers, they may also self-select the information they provide. This may result in the exclusion of their most sexualized profile content if they were uncomfortable sharing it. To address this potential bias, we asked participants about the completeness of their profile donation, with 81 % affirming full donation. This suggests a fairly accurate portrayal of participants' MDA profiles. Yet, future research could explore sexualized self-presentation prevalence on MDAs through platform-centric methods like scraping or screen-monitoring.

Third, although differences in the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation between Tinder and Bumble were expected (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021), our study did not reveal platform differences. Moreover, the sociodemographic profiles of users on both platforms were similar, suggesting that these two MDAs attract similar users. This finding aligns with the notion that both Tinder and Bumble cater primarily to a mainstream, heterosexual audience (Konings et al., 2022), offering similar features for presenting and selecting potential partners. Consequently, the differences between these platforms may not lead to significant variations in platform dynamics regarding sexualized self-presentation. Therefore, we encourage future research to explore other MDAs with more distinct features and platform cultures. For example, 'Feeld' is an MDA which specifically targets users who are interested in exploring their sexual identity in non-traditional relationships.

Fourth, this study assessed gender in line with contemporary guidelines, i.e., considering participants' sex assigned at birth alongside their self-reported gender identity, to establish their gender. The number of non-cisgender individuals was very low ($n = 7$)[13] and therefore, they could not be included in the analyses (i.e., power constraints). While our gender questions provided a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of cisgender individuals, future research needs to purposively recruit gender minority individuals to improve our understanding of the mobile dating experiences and self-presentation practices of gender minority individuals. Dimensions of diversity beyond gender should also be considered in future sample recruitment when studying self-presentation practices on MDAs.

Lastly, this study is an initial investigation into the prevalence of sexualized self-presentation on MDAs and its cross-sectional association with both negative and positive BI. The question remains whether the factors associated with negative BI drive or result from sexualized self-presentation. In other words, do body surveillance, body shame and face dissatisfaction lead individuals to engage more in sexualized self-presentation on MDAs? Alternatively, does engaging in sexualized self-presentation on MDAs contribute to experiencing greater negative BI? Future research should go beyond cross-sectional relationships and explore both the short-and long-term effects of self-sexualized (active

[12] ($t(151) = -2.700$, $p < .01$).

[13] Descriptive statistics of the non-cisgender participants may be found on OSF: https://osf.io/u7k5w/?view_only= 72286f3dd2ab48809e971842e5b2d710

and passive) use of MDAs on users' body image and vice versa. This could be achieved through longitudinal, experimental, or ecological (e.g., ESM) study designs. In addition, qualitative work is needed to better understand motivations in sexualized self-presentation practices and meaning making of profiles that contain sexualized imagery.

Regarding implications, while MDAs offer opportunities for young adults to explore their sexual and romantic identities, our findings highlight a prevailing trend of sexualized self-presentation on these platforms. Interestingly, a sizeable portion of this sexualized self-presentation was manifested through facial expressions, underscoring the importance of facial sexual attractiveness on MDAs. Overall, the use of highly visual social media platforms and exposure to appearance-based content have been linked to a greater normalization of cosmetic surgery (e.g., acceptance/intention; Bij de Vaate et al., 2020; Hermans et al., 2022). The visually driven nature of MDAs, coupled with the prevalence of sexualized facial expressions, may serve as additional strong drivers to idealize facial beauty and users' related desire for (facial) cosmetic procedures (e.g., Botox, fillers). While cosmetic surgery can yield positive outcomes, such as boosting self-esteem, it can also result in adverse psychological outcomes, especially when pursued to please others (e.g., Honigman et al., 2004). Given that MDAs are primarily used to attract potential partners, the high prevalence of sexualized self-presentation, particularly through facial expressions, may prompt users to normalize and consider cosmetic surgery for external validation and hence increasing the likelihood of adverse psychological outcomes post procedure.

Additionally, the prevalence of a sexualized appearance culture on MDAs may impact the quality of connections formed. Relationships solely based on appearance may lack the depth and stability found in offline interactions, where factors beyond physical appearance and sexual appeal are more influential (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024). Moreover, prioritizing appearance in connections may contribute to the (sexual) objectification of others, viewing them primarily as (sexual) objects rather than individuals with emotions and vulnerabilities. This dehumanization could lead to antisocial behaviors such as ghosting, causing distress for those affected (Konings et al., 2023).

4.5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into engagement in sexualized self-presentation on MDAs. Results showed that over half of MDA users portrayed themselves (to some extent) in a sexualized manner in their profiles. Most sexualized self-presentation occurred in visual profile cues, mainly through sexualized facial expressions. This emphasis on visual cues suggests the presence of a sexually objectifying environment within MDAs, arguably leading users prioritize their physical sexual attractiveness in profile pictures as a means to attract potential partners. Future research is needed to evaluate to what extent navigating such sexualized platforms when forming romantic relationships impacts individual well-being as well as relationship functioning.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Vandenbosch: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Sindy Sumter:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Femke Konings:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

I have shared the link to my data in attachment.

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Author agreement statement

The authors the undersigned declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us.

We understand that the Corresponding Author is the sole contact for the Editorial process. He/she is responsible for communicating with the other authors about progress, submissions of revisions and final approval of proofs.

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