

Following their lead? Connecting mainstream media use to Black women's gender beliefs and sexual agency

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Abstract

Although media exposure has emerged as a significant predictor of consumers' sexual decision-making, less is known about the mechanisms involved and about the dynamics of these relations for adults, in general, and for African American adults, in particular. To address these gaps, we used structural equation modeling to test whether heterosexual Black women's endorsement of traditional gender and sexual roles mediates connections between their consumption of four mainstream media (music videos, reality TV programming, movies, and women's magazines) and three dimensions of their sexual well-being (sexual assertiveness, sexual inhibition, and sexual deception). We surveyed 594 heterosexual Black women aged 17-55 who were undergraduate and graduate students at two universities (one HBCU and one predominantly White institution). Results confirmed expectations, such that greater media consumption was associated with greater support of traditional gender and sexual roles; in turn, endorsing these roles predicted lower levels of sexual assertiveness, greater sexual inhibition, and more frequent use of sexual dishonesty to retain a partner. We discuss implications of these findings for psychology and sexuality research and also for Black women's sexual relationships.

Following their lead? Connecting mainstream media use to Black women's gender beliefs and sexual agency

Regular exposure to the sexual content of mainstream media, defined as media targeting a broad, predominantly White audience, has been linked to more permissive sexual attitudes and to earlier and more extensive levels of sexual exploration (for review, see Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2013). Questions remain, however, about the media's role as a sexual educator. One question is the mechanism involved: How and why do media have these effects on sexual behavior? Theoretical models (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Wright, 2011) argue that connections from media use to sexual behavior are complex and are mediated by multiple cognitions. Given the heavily gendered nature of media content (Scharrer, 2013), we explore here viewers' acceptance of the gender and sexual roles espoused by the dominant culture as one possible mediator.

A second question is: Do the samples usually studied constrain our understanding of the media's role as a sexual socializer? Samples tested in the existing work have centered on White, predominantly middle-class, high school students in the U.S. (for review, see Ward et al., 2013). Given that youth of color consume media at higher levels than White youth (Rideout, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2011), we focus on this group, and on young Black women, specifically. Evidence that the gender role norms and media perceptions among Black women may both diverge from and conform to White responses sets up an intriguing paradox worthy of exploration. Further, because existing studies have focused on adolescents, they tested virginity status and precursory sexual behaviors as outcomes. Yet adult sexuality is broader than sexual initiation and includes attitudes and behaviors such as sexual confidence and sexual agency (defined as the ability to identify, communicate, and negotiate one's sexual needs). We therefore believe that analyses among adults should include a larger range of sexual outcomes. Accordingly, among a sample of heterosexual, adult Black women, we tested whether exposure to mainstream media predicts

their beliefs about gender roles and sexual roles, and whether endorsing these beliefs is associated with their sexual agency.

Gendered Sexual Scripts and their Connections to Media Use

Sexual scripts are culturally grounded directives for sexual behavior that outline expectations about appropriate sexual partners, relationships, and emotions (Wiederman, 2005). In the script for female sexuality within White, heterosexual, middle-class culture in the U.S., hereafter referred to as “traditional,” women are expected to be sexually passive, use their looks and bodies to attract men, prioritize emotions over sex, and set sexual limits; it is a relationship-focused, sexually-restrained approach (Kim et al., 2007; Wiederman, 2005). Men are expected to actively pursue sexual relationships, objectify women, and prioritize sex over emotion; their script prioritizes sexual pleasure and exploration. Implicit is the assumption that male-female relations are inherently adversarial, given that the roles for women and men are at odds (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). We refer to this combined set of expectations as gendered sexual scripts.

Evidence suggests that mainstream media are significant purveyors of these scripts. On primetime television, references to gendered sexual scripts occur 15.5 times per hour (Kim et al., 2007), with messages that equate masculinity with virility leading the way. On reality dating programs, references to women as sexual objects have been found to occur 5.9 times per hour, and references to men as sexually-driven occur 3.6 times per hour (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg & Smith, 2007). In music videos, content frequently features women as sexual objects who wear more revealing clothing and engage in more objectifying dance and sexual touching than men (e.g., Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Wallis, 2011). In feature films, comments that sexualize women’s bodies are *the* most prevalent type of sexual dialogue (Callister, Stern, Coyne, Robinson, & Bennion, 2011), and girls/women are more likely than boys/men to be depicted wearing sexy attire, showing exposed skin, and mentioned as physically attractive (Smith, Choueiti, Prescott,

& Pieper, 2013). In women's magazines, articles often depict men as sex-obsessed and place young women's ability to establish and maintain heterosexual dating relationships at the center of their identities (Kim & Ward, 2004).

According to Wright's sexual script acquisition, activation, and application model (3AM), regular exposure to these media shapes viewers' schemas or scripts, which then inform their sexual behavior. The 3AM argues that sexual media content exposes consumers to novel sexual scripts (acquisition), primes existing sexual scripts (activation), and is used to guide one's own sexual activities or judgments of other's activities (application). Sexual media content is believed to inform both specific sexual scripts, such as how to ask someone out for a first date, and also inform higher-order scripts, which are general rules and principles for behavior extracted from media content (e.g., the expectation that men are more sexually assertive and women are more sexually passive). It is these higher-order scripts, specifically those centered on sexual roles for women and men, which are our focus. Thus, according to the 3AM, it is expected that heavy exposure to mainstream media, which frequently feature these gendered sexual scripts, will make these themes and related content seem more prevalent, normative, and acceptable. Viewers exposed regularly to these scripts will thus be more inclined to internalize and apply them.

Empirical research does indeed document links between media use and greater support of individual components of these gendered sexual scripts. Among predominantly White samples of undergraduate women in the U.S., heavier viewing of prime-time TV programs (Ward, 2002), reality dating programs (Ferris et al., 2007; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), and reality TV and overall TV (Seabrook, Ward, Cortina, Giaccardi, & Lippman, 2016) has each been associated with greater endorsement of central components of gendered sexual scripts. In addition, frequent exposure to music videos has been associated with stronger acceptance both of women as sexual objects (Hust & Lei, 2008; Ward, 2002) and of the sexual double standard (Zhang, Miller, &

Harrison, 2008), which posits that sexual experiences are more acceptable among men than women. Looking at print media, Kim and Ward (2004) found that more frequent reading of teen-focused magazines predicted stronger support of the male sexual script among college women.

Gendered Sexual Scripts and their Connections to Women's Sexual Experiences

Yet accepting dominant constructions of femininity does have consequences. Feminist scholars have long argued that these gendered sexual scripts are constraining and may be barriers to women's sexual well-being (e.g., Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006; Morokoff, 2000; Tolman, 1999). Adhering to these sexual roles is argued to diminish women's sexual entitlement and empowerment and to reduce their sexual functioning and satisfaction by promoting sexual passivity. Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck (2005) surmise that adherence to traditional gender roles may foster sexual compliance, in which women internalize the notion that it is their responsibility to be responsive to men's sexual desire rather than to their own. In addition, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) remind us that women confront a relational imperative, whereby it is assumed that women *should* always want romance, relationships, and marriage.

Empirical evidence supports this theorizing, linking acceptance of traditional gendered sexual scripts to the sexual health and functioning of predominantly White samples of women. Among White and Latina adolescent girls, greater endorsements of traditional gender roles and traditional conceptions of femininity have been associated with less sexual agency, poorer sexual self-efficacy, greater support of romantic conventions, and lower sexual self-acceptance (Impett et al., 2006; Tolman, 1999). Among undergraduate women, embracing traditional gender roles has been associated with lower levels of sexual assertiveness, less sexual risk knowledge, and more negative attitudes toward condom use (Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Shearer, Hosterman, Gillen, & Lefkowitz, 2005). In one of the few studies to investigate media use as an antecedent, Seabrook and colleagues (2016) found that

greater levels of television viewing predicted greater acceptance of gendered sexual scripts, as measured by four scales. In turn, endorsing these scripts predicted diminished sexual agency. Thus, existing research with predominantly White samples indicates that media frequently present gendered sexual scripts; that heavy media consumption predicts greater endorsement of these sexual scripts; and that endorsing these scripts predicts diminished sexual functioning.

Contexts of Gender and Sexual Socialization for African American Women

To apply these findings and theories to heterosexual African American women, we first need to consider the contexts in which they are developing gender roles and sexual scripts. One factor to consider is the socio-historical forces within the United States that may have created differences in the gender role norms held by Black and White women. Many of these differences are thought to stem from the cult of true womanhood, which was a notion of womanhood that emerged for White middle-class women in the mid-1800s (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). This ideal emphasized piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness as core attributes by which a woman judged herself and was judged by others. Yet Black women's slave and later paid labor made some aspects of true womanhood challenging to attain. Circumstances required Black women to assume both the hard labor expectations of masculinity *and* the nurturing expectations of femininity. Thus, the gender ideal that emerged for Black women encompasses feminine traits associated with nurturing as well as masculine, instrumental traits associated with providing, such as strength and independence (Abrams et al., 2016; Littlefield, 2003). Findings indicate that Black women have indeed incorporated both sets of traits into their identity as women (Cole & Zucker, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2010; Settles et al., 2008), and often appear androgynous on standard scales, more so than do White women (Harris, 1996; Littlefield, 2003).

A second factor to consider is that Black women negotiate their gender and sexual roles within the presence of the Jezebel stereotype, a stereotype of Black women as promiscuous,

sexually insatiable, and manipulative. This negative stereotype of Black women originated from slavery as a means to rationalize the pervasive sexual assault of enslaved Black women by White men (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010). These representations of Black women have persisted (e.g., Tyson, 2012), and Black women's awareness that they may be perceived this way is a prominent component of their sexual selves (Anakaraonye, Mann, Ingram, & Henderson, 2018; Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013; Johnson, 2013). One strategy used to counter these stereotypes is the "politics of Black respectability," which refers to efforts initiated by late 19th-century middle-class and church Black women and men to resist being stereotyped as sexually immoral (Higginbotham, 1993; French, 2013; Johnson, 2013). This approach promotes self-restraint, sexual purity, cleanliness, and polite manners to disrupt negative perceptions of Black people. As such, "respectable" women were to avoid appearing overtly sexual. It is argued that this desire to be seen as respectable, as "ladies," is a significant element in the construction of middle-class Black femininity, even today (Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

A third unique sexual context for young Black women, and for college students, specifically, is the imbalanced ratio of women to men, with Black women outnumbering Black men on college campuses (Ferguson, Quinn, Eng, & Sandelowski, 2006; Hall, Lee, & Witherspoon, 2014). In qualitative studies (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2014; Hall & Tanner, 2016), Black women note that this imbalance has likely increased the prevalence of casual relationships, even though committed relationships may be their preference; has lowered expectations for monogamy within committed relationships; and has increased competition between women for the attention of men.

Given these complexities, how might we expect Black women's awareness of these gendered scripts and stereotypes to affect their sexual beliefs and behavior? It is possible that Black women's experiences *outside* hegemonic femininity may allow them to develop gender

and sexual identities that counter prescriptions for women to be sexually passive and provide them with the agency to advocate for their own needs (Emerson, 2002; Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2012). Indeed, perhaps racial inequality may inspire Black women and men to resist the system and create relationship models that are more creative and egalitarian (Fasula et al., 2012).

Alternatively, Black women may feel *compelled* to conform to the passive, partner-pleasing components of the female sexual script for multiple reasons: to conform to expectations of respectability, to counter stereotypes of them as hypersexual, to compete successfully for male partners, or to assuage the racial inequality and emasculation experienced by their Black male partners (Fasula et al., 2012). Indeed, race is argued to heighten this compulsion for middle-class Black women because their financial independence may be read as a sign of failed femininity (Wilkins, 2012). As a result, Black college women may be *more* likely to submit to a subordinate role in heterosexual relationships in order to prove their femininity and disconfirm stereotypes (Townsend, 2008). Based on these analyses, it is possible, then, that Black women's encounters with gendered sexual scripts in mainstream media may lead them to reject or enact them.

Empirical Evidence Supporting Our Model among African Americans

Although media effects research testing African American samples is limited, there is some support for the individual pathways of our model (see Fig 1). First, evidence indicates that everyday media exposure is associated with the gender beliefs and sexual scripts of Black media users (A→B), although nearly all studies have tested teens. Here, Black teens' consumption of specific media genres, such as sitcoms or music videos, is associated with greater acceptance of gender and sexual role stereotypes (Bryant, 2008; Gordon, 2008; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker 2005). In one of the few studies to test adults, Jerald, Ward, Moss, Thomas, and Fletcher (2017) found that frequent consumption of music videos or mainstream women's magazines was each associated with stronger support of traditional gender roles among Black undergraduates.

Second, several studies conducted among all Black or majority Black female samples have found that stronger support for traditional feminine beliefs or traits is associated with higher engagement in sexual risk behaviors or cognitions ($B \rightarrow C$) (Leech, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2010). For example, surveying 715 African-American girls aged 15-21, Raiford, Seth, and DiClemente (2013) found that believing that a relationship is imperative was associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in several risky sexual behaviors and a greater fear of negotiating condom use. More specific to beliefs about Black women, endorsement of the Jezebel stereotype has been associated with risky sexual behavior among Black teens and adults (e.g., Hall & Witherspoon, 2015; Townsend et al., 2010). However, others failed to find links between gender beliefs and sexual behavior (e.g., Hall & Pichon, 2014; O'Sullivan, Hoffman, Harrison, & Dolezal, 2006).

Third, exposure to mainstream media, especially to reality TV, music videos, movies, or magazines, has been found to predict the sexual behavior of African Americans ($A \rightarrow C$). Once again, nearly all studies have tested teens, and with mixed results. Several studies that included samples with at least 40% Black participants found that having a media diet high in sexual content predicted a greater likelihood of progressing in sexual activity over time (Bleakley et al., 2008), and greater sexual exploration (L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006; Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). In one of the few studies to test only African Americans, girls who reported more exposure to rap music videos were two times more likely to have had multiple sexual partners and 1.6 times more likely to have acquired a new STI one year later than girls who reported less exposure (Wingood et al., 2003). At the same time, other studies have yielded null findings among Black youth, even though significant findings emerged among the White youth tested (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009). Finally, a few longitudinal studies have found that sexual cognitions mediate connections between Black teens' media use and sexual behavior (e.g., Bleakley et al., 2011; Johnson-Baker, Markham, Baumler, Swain,

& Emery, 2016; Martino et al., 2005); however, these studies did *not* examine gender roles or sexual roles as mediators. Thus, among Black teens, media use is linked to greater support of gender and sexual stereotypes and is linked directly *and* indirectly to sexual behaviors. However, endorsement of gendered sexual scripts has yet to be tested as one of these mediators.

The Current Study

The media have emerged as powerful forces of sexual socialization, such that heavier use among White youth is linked to greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, and both media use and support of traditional sexual scripts are linked to sexual behavior. Might we expect these same patterns among Black media consumers? At this point, support for these connections among African Americans is murky. Although there is consistent evidence that media use is linked with greater acceptance of traditional gender and sexual roles, there is mixed evidence linking both media use and gender roles to sexual behavior. Moreover, these studies tested teens, not adults, and did not examine gendered sexual scripts as a mediator. Attention to the context of Black sexual development highlights a paradox that offers little clarity. Because the ability to acquire, activate, and apply media's sexual scripts depends on perceived similarity to media characters (Wright, 2011), this ability may be diminished among African Americans if the models are perceived as negative, dissimilar, or inauthentic. Alternatively, Black women may feel compelled to embrace the traditional scripts for the many reasons noted earlier. We sought to address this question and paradox. Among a sample of heterosexual Black women, we tested whether exposure to mainstream media is associated with their support of gendered sexual scripts, which in turn might influence multiple components of their sexual agency.

Sexual agency is a multi-dimensional construct that includes being able to identify, communicate, and negotiate one's sexual needs, and to initiate behaviors that allow for the satisfaction of those needs (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Froyum, 2010). We chose to focus on

agency, over other dimensions of sexual well-being, because traditional sexual roles demand female passivity and prioritize male sexual pleasure and are often linked to a *lack* of agency for women. We assessed this construct in three ways. One scale assessed sexual assertiveness, which is conceptualized as the ability to communicate one's sexual needs and desires to a sexual partner (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). A second set of scales assessed the absence of agency, which can be seen as feeling sexually guilty, shameful, inhibited, or self-conscious. Finally, because gender norms expect women to continuously seek and prioritize romantic relationships, and because Black women have expressed anxiety about partner availability, we assessed women's use of sexual deception to maintain a relationship and keep a partner close as a behavioral indicator of this relational imperative and anxiety.

Expectations according to the 3AM (Wright, 2011) are that prevalent and salient media messages create a script for understanding sexual interactions, and that more frequent exposure increases the probability of script activation and application. As gendered sexual scripts are a prevalent media theme, we anticipated that heavier exposure to mainstream media would lead to greater acceptance and enactment of these themes in women's sexual behavior. Although it can be argued that Black women's location outside of middle-class White femininity may give them space to critique mainstream media images and cultural norms, we believe that their unique contexts and efforts for respectability may escalate efforts to achieve hegemonic femininity. Within this framework, we tested the following hypotheses (see Figure 1):

Hypothesis 1: Greater consumption of mainstream media (reality TV, movies, music videos, and women's magazines) will be associated with greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts.

Hypothesis 2: Greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts will be associated with diminished sexual agency, as indicated by less sexual assertiveness, greater sexual inhibition, and more use of sexually deceptive strategies to maintain a relationship.

Hypothesis 3: Endorsement of gendered sexual scripts will mediate the relations between media consumption and our three measures of sexual agency.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 594 African American women ($M=22.21$; $SD=5.39$) recruited from two college campuses in the United States. University 1 ($n=359$) is a large, predominately White, Midwestern public university (PWI). University 2 ($n=235$) is a small, historically Black, southeastern public university (HBCU). Study inclusion criteria required that participants self-identify as Black/African-American, be 18-30 years old, and be currently enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate/professional student. Full data from 606 students was obtained. Students older than 30 who completed the survey were retained ($N=37$); students who identified as exclusively lesbian ($N=12$) were removed due to our focus on heterosexual scripts.

Students at both sites were invited to participate using demographic information provided by each university's Office of the Registrar. At University 1, the Office of the Registrar sent recruitment emails directly to a random sample of currently-enrolled students that self-identified as a Black/African American woman. At University 2, researchers sent recruitment emails to a random sample of students matching the inclusion criteria based on the registrar's data. The recruitment email provided a link and invited students to participate in a one-hour, online survey study investigating the health and well-being of Black women. Participants were provided a \$25 VISA gift card as incentive for participation. Although most of the sample identified as Black/African American (81%), another 11% identified as bi/multiracial, 1.3% as African, 2.0% as West Indian/Caribbean, and 1.3% as Afro-Latina. Participants came from well-educated backgrounds, with 23% of their mothers having completed bachelor's degrees, and 19% having earned a graduate or professional degree. In addition, 16.7% of their fathers had earned a

bachelor's degree, and 14.8% had earned graduate or professional degrees. Participants represented a range of sexual experience levels, with 26.8% reporting never having had vaginal intercourse. Of those with coital experience, 43.7% reported 1-3 lifetime sexual partners.

Measures

Music videos, reality TV, and movies. Using a scale that ranged from 0-12, participants indicated the number of hours they watch music videos and reality TV programs on a typical weekday and weekend. Average weekly viewing hours were calculated for each genre by multiplying weekday use by 5, multiplying weekend use by 2, and then adding these products. Participants also indicated (from 0-12) how many movies they watch in a typical month in the movie theatre, on video/DVD/computer, and on cable/premium channels. A sum was computed across these three items to indicate monthly movie consumption.

Magazines. Participants indicated how many issues per year (between zero and 12) they read of 17 monthly magazines. Our analyses focused on nine mainstream women's magazines: *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *In Style*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*, and *Vogue*. We chose this selection partly from past research (e.g., Kim & Ward, 2012), and partly because it includes fashion and lifestyle magazines targeted at a mainstream young adult female audience. To keep our focus on mainstream media, we did not include Black-oriented magazines (e.g., *Essence*). We computed a mean score across the 9 responses for each participant ($\alpha = .88$).

Gendered sexual scripts. Because no one measure captures all of our culture's gendered sexual scripts, we chose to use a collection of three scales to assess traditional gender roles and traditional courtship norms. For each scale, participants rated their agreement with statements on a 6-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The first measure was the Heterosexual Script Scale (Seabrook et al., 2016), which is a 22-item scale ($\alpha = .91$) that assesses support for gender-specific courtship strategies, orientations toward commitment, and

sexual norms. A sample item is, “A woman should be willing to make personal sacrifices in order to satisfy her partner.” The second measure was the Male Role Attitudes Scale (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1994), an 8-item scale ($\alpha = .73$) that assesses acceptance of traditional views toward the male role as stoic, sexual, and tough. A sample item is, “I admire a man who is totally sure of himself.” The third scale was Burt’s (1980) 9-item Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale ($\alpha = .86$), which tests the belief that romantic relationships are fundamentally exploitative, and that members of each gender, especially women, are manipulative, dishonest, and untrustworthy. A sample item reads, “Most women are sly and manipulative when they are out to attract a man.” Mean scores were computed for each scale such that higher scores indicate greater endorsement.

Sexual assertiveness. To measure sexual assertiveness, one dimension of sexual agency, we used the Hulbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (Hurlbert, 1998). Participants used a 5-point scale (1= *never*; 5= *all of the time*) to indicate their frequency of engaging in 25 sexual behaviors or cognitions. A sample item is: “I communicate my sexual desires to my partner.” Mean scores were computed such that higher scores indicate greater sexual assertiveness ($\alpha = .90$). Hulbert (1991) validated this measure using a nonclinical sample of women, and Fletcher et al. (2014) reported an alpha score of .85 in a sample of Black college students.

Sexual inhibition. First, to indicate their levels of sexual guilt and shame, representing an absence of agency, participants completed the Guilt and Shame subscale of the Women’s Sexual Working Models Scale (Birnbaum & Reis, 2006). Participants responded to each of the six items using a 10-point scale (0= *very uncharacteristic of me*; 9= *very characteristic of me*). A sample item is, “Sexual activity makes me feel guilty.” Mean scores ($\alpha = .93$) were calculated such that higher scores correspond to more feelings of guilt and shame. Second, to indicate their self-consciousness about their sexual selves, participants completed the six-item Sexual Embarrassment subscale of the Sexual Self-Consciousness Scale (van Lankveld, Geijen, &

Sykora, 2008). Responses were provided on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree), and include items such as, “I quickly feel embarrassed in sexual situations.” Mean scores were computed ($\alpha = .91$) such that higher scores equal more self-consciousness.

Sexual deception. To measure sexual behaviors that might reflect an internalized relational imperative, we had participants complete the 15-item Sexual Deception Scale (Marelich, Lundquist, Painter, & Mechanic, 2008). We analyzed and combined here only the 3-item Self-Serving subscale (e.g., “Had sex with someone so that you would have someone to sleep next to”), and the 5-item Avoiding Confrontation subscale (“Had sex with someone so they wouldn’t break up with you”). Participants reported to what extent they have ever engaged in each act of deception using the following three options: 1 = *Never*; 2 = *Yes, once*; 3 = *Yes, more than once*. Mean scores were computed across the eight items ($\alpha = .82$), such that higher scores indicate more frequent use of dishonesty and manipulation to maintain relationships.

Results

Descriptives and Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics of the central variables are provided in Table 1. On average, media consumption levels were quite high, with participants reporting watching 15 hours of reality TV and nearly 8 hours of music videos a week. On average, support was moderate to low for the items reflecting gendered sexual scripts. Bivariate correlations among manifest study variables are provided in Table 2. All media variables were significantly correlated with each other, and all gendered sexual script variables were significantly correlated with each other.

Testing the Hypotheses

We used structural equation modeling with Mplus (Muthén, & Muthén, 2010) to test the hypothesized direct and indirect effects of media consumption on gendered sexual scripts, sexual assertiveness, sexual inhibition, and sexual deception depicted in Figure 1. We used a two-step

approach to SEM (Kline, 2010), first examining the association of indicators to their specified latent constructs (measurement model) and then examining relations between the latent constructs (structural model).

We used the item-to-construct balance technique to create three parcels for the indicators for sexual assertiveness and sexual deception (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). This method creates factor loadings for each item using a one-factor model, and items are distributed across three parcels in order of their factor loadings (e.g., the highest loading item goes on Parcel 1, the second highest on Parcel 2, the third highest on Parcel 3, the fourth highest on Parcel 1, etc.) until all items are distributed. A mean score for each parcel is then calculated, and the three parcels are used as the indicators for the latent construct. For the media consumption latent variable, participants' consumption of music videos, reality TV, movies, and women's magazines were used as the four indicators. For the gendered sexual scripts latent variable, scores on the Adversarial Sexual Beliefs, Heterosexual Script, and Male Role Attitudes Scales were used as the three indicators. For the sexual inhibition latent variable, scores on the sexual self-consciousness and sexual guilt and shame scales were used as the indicators.

Measurement Model

The measurement model was tested by loading the indicators onto their respective latent constructs using confirmatory factor analysis. Modification indices suggested that the error terms between reality TV and women's magazines may share common sources of error variance; this error covariance is estimated in subsequent analyses. The measurement model fit well, $\chi^2(80) = 165.63, p < .05$, RMSEA = .04 with 90% CI [.03, .05], CFI = .98, TLI = .97, SRMR = .04. Each indicator loaded significantly onto its specified latent construct ($\beta = .54$ to .97). The model fit and significant loadings demonstrate construct validity for the operationalization of the latent constructs with these indicators (MacCallum & Austin, 2000). Zero-order latent variable

correlations indicated that participants who consumed more media were more likely to endorse gendered sexual scripts ($r = .34, p < .001$) and report higher sexual deception ($r = .18, p < .001$); media consumption was not significantly correlated with sexual assertiveness ($r = -.08, p = ns$) or inhibition ($r = .07, p = ns$). Participants who endorsed gendered sexual scripts also reported less sexual assertiveness ($r = -.22, p < .001$), more sexual inhibition ($r = .32, p < .001$), and more sexual deception ($r = .27, p < .001$). Sexual assertiveness was negatively correlated with sexual inhibition ($r = -.85, p < .001$), but not significantly correlated with sexual deception ($r = -.07, p = ns$). Sexual inhibition was not significantly correlated with sexual deception ($r = .06, p = ns$).

Structural Model

Next, we examined the proposed structural relationships between the latent constructs in the model (Figure 2). Because responses differed significantly by school for 10 of 15 variables/parcels, featured a large age range (17-58 years), and included some women who had not had vaginal intercourse (26.8%), we controlled for school, age, and coital experience (0/1). In our model, school site was a significant correlate such that women attending the HBCU were more likely to report higher levels of media consumption, endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, and sexual assertiveness. Older women were more likely to report lower levels of media consumption and higher levels of sexual deception. Finally, women who had not had vaginal intercourse were more likely to report less sexual assertiveness, more sexual inhibition, and less sexual deception.

The structural model fit well, $X^2(112) = 243.97, p < .001$, RMSEA = .04 with 90% CI [.04, .05], CFI = .96, TLI = .95, SRMR = .04. In line with our 3 hypotheses, higher levels of media consumption were associated with greater endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, which, in turn, was associated with less sexual assertiveness, more sexual inhibition, and more sexual deception. Table 3 summarizes the results of the bootstrapping procedures used to examine the indirect associations. Results from the 1,000 bootstrap samples indicated that the mean indirect

associations between media consumption and sexual assertiveness, sexual inhibition, and sexual deception were significant. The model explained 15.6% of the variance in gendered sexual scripts, 22.9% of the variance in sexual assertiveness, 29.6% of the variance in sexual inhibition, and 24.4% of the variance in sexual deception.

Alternative Model

It is also likely that participants who endorse gendered sexual scripts selectively consume media with content that reinforces their existing gender beliefs. We tested this reverse causality model, examining whether gendered sexual scripts are instead more predictive of media consumption, to obtain some sense of the directionality of this relation. The reverse causality model switches the order of the media consumption and gendered sexual scripts latent construct, but is otherwise identical to the proposed model in Figure 2.

This reverse causality alternative model did not fit as well (RMSEA = .05 with 90% CI [.05, .06], CFI = .95, TLI = .93, SRMR = .06, AIC = 28096.96, BIC = 28395.27) as the proposed model (RMSEA = .04 with 90% CI [.04, .05], CFI = .96, TLI = .95, SRMR = .04, AIC = 28039.61, BIC = 28337.92). Because the chi-square statistic is sensitive to large samples, comparing raw chi-square values between models is recommended over performing a chi-square difference test (Kline, 2010). The alternative model had a larger chi-square value ($X^2 = 301.32$) than the proposed model ($X^2 = 243.97$), providing another indicator of worse fit. The model comparison suggests that media consumption is more predictive of endorsement of gendered sexual scripts than gendered sexual scripts are of media consumption. We therefore rejected the alternative model in favor of the proposed model in Figure 2.

Discussion

Findings indicate that the sexual messages heterosexual Black women are exposed to from the media may indeed be one of the forces contributing to their sexual decision-making.

Currently, most research has tested predominantly White samples, has focused on adolescents, and has used virginity status or age of sexual initiation as the sexual outcome (for review, see Ward et al., 2013). As a result, we know less about whether African American adults' use of mainstream media shapes their gendered sexual scripts and subsequent sexual well-being. We attempted to fill these gaps with the current study, sampling nearly 600 heterosexual, Black women attending two universities in the U.S. Overall, findings supported our expectations: Black women's consumption of four media formats did indeed predict greater support of gendered sexual scripts; in turn, endorsing these scripts predicted lower levels of sexual assertiveness, greater sexual inhibition, and a greater frequency of using sexual deception to retain romantic partners. We outline below potential implications for research and for Black women's lives.

First, we believe these findings contribute additional insight concerning the mechanisms that mediate connections between media use and sexual behavior. The assumption of multiple media and psychology theories (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Wright, 2011) is that media content shapes viewers' cognitions, including personal beliefs and assumptions of what others do, and these cognitions influence behavior. Several cognitions have been tested thus far as mediators of sexual behavior, including sexual self-efficacy (e.g., Martino et al., 2005), perceived peer norms (e.g., Bleakley et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2006), perceived peer pressures (e.g., Bleakley et al., 2011; Johnson-Baker et al., 2016), and intentions to engage in intercourse (e.g., Martino et al., 2005). However, we believe these cognitions may be more reflective of *adolescent* sexual experiences and their dealing with pressures about when to first engage in intercourse. Are they the best cognitions for studying *adult* sexual decision-making? Although studies by Ward and colleagues support gender beliefs as mediators among predominantly White samples (Ward, Epstein, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011; Ward & Friedman, 2006), the scripts they assessed were quite narrow. Ours stands as one of the few media effects studies (outside of Seabrook et

al., 2017) to demonstrate a mediating role of a range of gendered sexual scripts.

Second, our study indicates that endorsing gendered sexual scripts, which are prevalent in mainstream media, has significant implications for adult relationships. As noted, theoretical and empirical analyses suggest that endorsing traditional gender norms may jeopardize women's ability to connect with their sexual self, express sexual agency, and prioritize sexual pleasure (Curtin et al., 2011; Morokoff, 2000; Tolman, 1999). How might these constraints manifest in heterosexual Black women's relationships? Sexual assertiveness carries many benefits that women who follow these scripts may not experience. Being sexually assertive is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and duration, higher frequencies of sexual activity and orgasm, and greater sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert, 1991; Morokoff et al., 1997). Being able to effectively communicate one's sexual desires is a necessary step toward the development and achievement of healthy sexual intimacy (Morokoff, 2000; Noar, Morokoff, & Redding, 2002). Moreover, experiencing sexual guilt and shame is associated with less satisfaction with one's sexual experiences, less comfort with sexuality, and lower condom use self-efficacy (Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010; Moore & Davidson, 1997; Wayment & Aronson, 2002).

Also, if heterosexual Black women do *not* prioritize their own sexual needs and health, it may be difficult for them to self-advocate and insist on safe-sex practices (Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008). The deliberate planning needed for enacting safe-sex practices and the potential rejection that comes with insisting that a partner use a condom may feel antithetical to traditional gender norms that require women to be sexually passive, to take care of others' needs before their own, and to prioritize romantic relationships (Fasula et al., 2007; Hall & Tanner, 2016). It is not surprising that scholars have identified gender role norms as one of the most important social factors influencing vulnerability to STIs and HIV (e.g., Kerrigan et al., 2007).

Finally, our findings indicate that heterosexual Black female college students are not

immune to some of the documented correlates and consequences of mainstream media use. As outlined earlier, it was possible that Black women might reject traditional gendered scripts conveyed by characters in mainstream media (who may not look like them), or, alternatively, might experience strong pressure to adhere to traditional female sexual scripts in efforts to be “respectable,” follow norms of the larger culture, or counter racial stereotypes. Our findings suggest that the latter options appear most likely among Black female college students. Fasula and colleagues (2012) anticipated this outcome, arguing that although racial ideologies may afford Black women some space to be assertive and active, this distance may not necessarily translate into sexual agency. Black women may be concerned that if they assert themselves in heterosexual interactions and advocate for their needs, they risk reinstating negative stereotypes of Black women as overly assertive and also become vulnerable to rejection by Black men for challenging their patriarchal authority (Fasula et al., 2012).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Directions

We note several limitations of our study that future research may want to address. First, because these are cross-sectional correlational data, they do not permit us to draw conclusions about causality. Although we found small differences in the fit indices of our proposed and alternative models, there is likely some degree of reciprocal causation. Longitudinal or experimental data are needed to confirm causality. Second, our sample included only Black women enrolled in college or graduate school, and therefore likely represent only one segment of the Black, U.S. population. Further study is needed of Black women from other occupational and socioeconomic levels.

Third, we assessed only a segment of Black women’s media diets. Other forms of media use, such as music exposure or social media use, or other TV genres, may also contribute to their gendered sexual scripts and should be examined in future research. Moreover, we did not

examine media that focus on egalitarian depictions of sex and gender. For example, women who watch feminist YouTube channels (e.g., *Feminist Frequency*) may encounter more progressive gender messages and may experience greater sexual agency as a result of this media use.

Relatedly, we focused on mainstream media; other research with Black participants suggests that different results may emerge with Black-oriented media (e.g., Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004). Further study is needed of the content and impact of Black-oriented media, and especially Black-oriented relationship media, which include films, TV programs, and books.

Fourth, additional attention may be needed to assess constructs such as “gendered sexual scripts” and “sexual agency” among Black women. Indeed, because Black women face race-specific stereotypes of their sexuality, such as the hypersexual Jezebel stereotype, Black women’s acceptance of this stereotype could be included as one of the gendered sexual scripts they are negotiating (Jerald et al., 2017). Moreover, we did not measure Black women’s actual sexual behavior, such as their communication with a sexual partner or safe-sex practices. Future research may include more behavioral indicators, as well as other dimensions of sexual well-being such as satisfaction, safe-sex self-efficacy, and entitlement to sexual pleasure. Attention to these dynamics among Black women in same-sex relationships is also needed.

Conclusion. This study extends research on sexual media effects to heterosexual, African American women and indicates that Black women’s use of mainstream media is associated with a stronger support of gendered sexual scripts, which in turn is associated with diminished sexual agency. We have identified several ways in which endorsing such scripts may be shaping women’s sexual relationships; there are likely many others. Future research should continue to identify both impactful media and their mechanisms.

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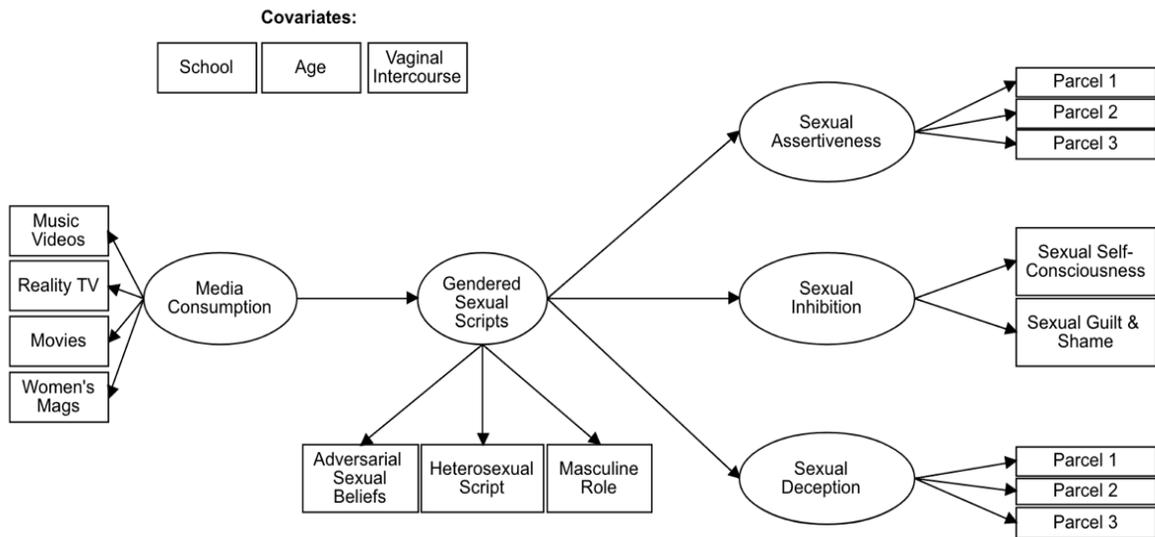
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Figure 1.

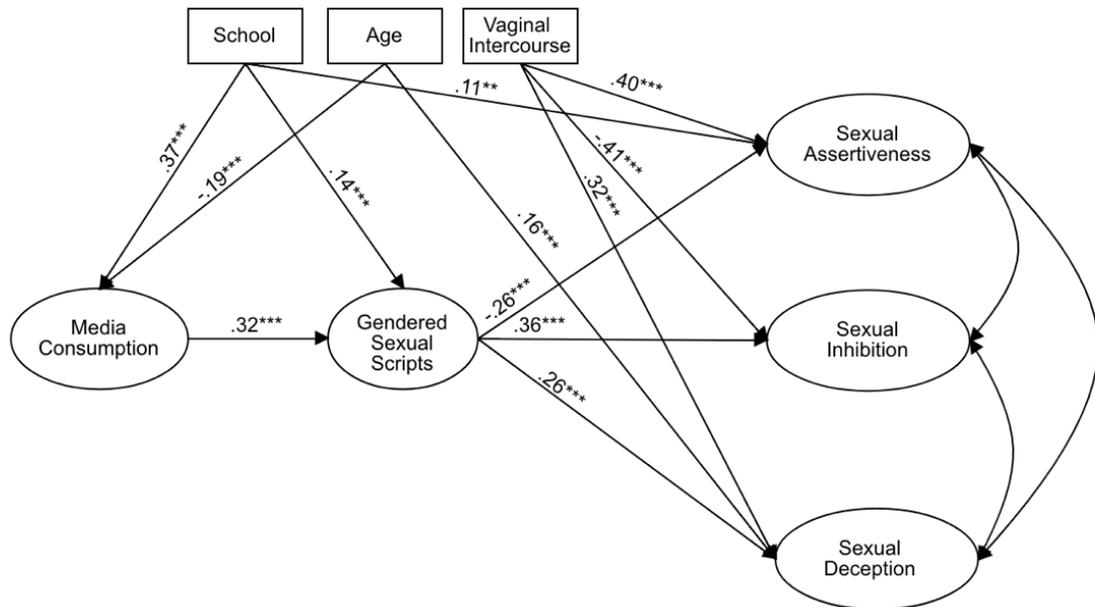
Conceptual Model



Note. All latent constructs regressed on school, age, and sexual experience covariates; not depicted for clarity.

Figure 2.

Proposed Structural Model



Note. $N = 594$. Standardized regression coefficients are noted for each path. $*p \leq .05$; $**p \leq .01$; $***p \leq .001$. Only significant paths from the covariates are depicted. For School, 1 = Predominately White Institution, 2 = Historically Black University. For vaginal intercourse experience, 0 = no coital experience, 1 = some coital experience.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Variables of Interest

Latent variables	Full Sample	PWI	HBCU	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>		
Media Consumption					
Music Videos	7.71 (13.87)	5.06 (10.27)	11.75 (17.29)	-5.35***	.47
Reality TV	15.17 (15.35)	11.03 (13.09)	21.50 (16.38)	-8.23***	.71
Movies	8.09 (6.42)	7.08 (5.60)	9.64 (7.24)	-4.60***	.40
Women's Magazines	0.75 (1.43)	0.68 (1.23)	0.85 (1.70)	-1.35	.11
Gendered Sexual Scripts					
Adversarial Sexual Beliefs	2.56 (0.95)	2.37 (0.85)	2.85 (1.02)	-5.88***	.51
Heterosexual Script	3.03 (0.84)	2.87 (0.76)	3.28 (0.90)	-5.85***	.49
Masculine Role Attitudes	3.47 (0.82)	3.33 (0.77)	3.69 (0.84)	-5.34***	.45
Sexual Assertiveness					
Parcel 1	3.74 (0.77)	3.73 (0.81)	3.76 (0.71)	-0.51	.04
Parcel 2	3.47 (0.89)	3.37 (0.90)	3.60 (0.86)	-2.99**	.26
Parcel 3	3.70 (0.76)	3.70 (0.76)	3.71 (0.76)	-0.26	.01
Sexual Inhibition					
Sexual Self-Consciousness	2.79 (1.19)	2.84 (1.20)	2.74 (1.18)	0.96	.08
Sexual Guilt & Shame	3.15 (2.34)	3.15 (2.41)	3.14 (2.25)	-0.05	.00
Sexual deception					
Parcel 1	1.32 (0.51)	1.24 (0.44)	1.44 (0.58)	-4.83***	.39
Parcel 2	1.43 (0.61)	1.36 (0.59)	1.53 (0.63)	-3.17**	.28
Parcel 3	1.47 (0.62)	1.39 (0.56)	1.58 (0.68)	-3.68***	.31

Note. PWI = Participants attending a Predominately White Institution. HBCU = Participants attending a Historically Black College or University. ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 2

Bivariate correlations among manifest variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Music Videos	—														
2. Reality TV	.50**	—													
3. Movies	.44**	.41**	—												
4. Women's Magazines	.44**	.29**	.32**	—											
5. Adversarial Sexual Beliefs	.26**	.28**	.20**	.26**	—										
6. Heterosexual Script	.23**	.24**	.19**	.22**	.83**	—									
7. Masculine Role	.10**	.18**	.11**	.16**	.55**	.65**	—								
8. SA1	-.11**	-.03	-.04	-.18**	-.21**	-.23**	-.11**	—							
9. SA2	-.05	.03	.00	-.12**	-.16**	-.20**	-.05	.70**	—						
10. SA3	-.06	.00	.05	-.16**	-.20**	-.16**	-.02	.56**	.57**	—					
11. Sexual Self-Consciousness	-.04	-.03	-.04	.04	.18**	.19**	.15**	-.47**	-.57**	-.37**	—				
12. Sexual Guilt & Shame	.10*	.10*	.03	.15**	.20**	.24**	.18**	-.42**	-.45**	-.34**	.43**	—			
13. SD1	.12**	.11**	.17**	.14**	.23**	.27**	.15**	-.13**	-.08	-.07	.04	.03	—		
14. SD2	.02	.00	.04	.06	.14**	.19**	.13**	-.10*	-.07	-.08	.07	-.03	.61**	—	
15. SD3	.06	.06	.09*	.10*	.14**	.18**	.14**	-.05	-.01	.02	.01	.00	.63**	.52**	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. SA = sexual assertiveness parcels; SD = sexual deception parcels.

Table 3

Bootstrap Analysis of Magnitude and Statistical Significance of Indirect Relations

Indirect Effect	β (standardized indirect effect)	Mean indirect effect (B) ^a	<i>SE</i> of mean ^a	95% CI for mean indirect effect ^a
Media consumption → Gendered sexual scripts → Sexual assertiveness	-0.08	-0.088	0.025	-0.142, - 0.046***
Media consumption → Gendered sexual scripts → Sexual inhibition	0.12	0.127	0.030	0.079, 0.201***
Media consumption → Gendered sexual scripts → Sexual deception	0.08	0.089	0.027	0.045, 0.149***

Note. ^a These values are based on the unstandardized path coefficients. *** $p \leq .001$.